

Belgium Pedophilia Scandal /Did Authorities Cover Up Its Scope?: Book Revives Fear of Grand Conspiracy

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[World](#)

BRUSSELS— In Belgium, the X-Files refer not to the U.S. television series but to a series of horrific witness accounts of an alleged pedophile network.

The five women and the male transvestite who testified anonymously in Belgium under the code-name "X" described an underworld of snuff movies and sadomasochist torture that was almost impossible to believe. And they said that politicians and other highly placed members of society were involved.

The conventional wisdom is that the witnesses were either deranged or were recounting fantasies. It was, in the jargon of psychiatrists, a bad case of false-memory syndrome.

But a new book by three crime reporters, "The X-Files: What Belgium Was Not Supposed to Know About the Dutroux Affair," published in French and Dutch in November, asserts that the X-witnesses were more credible than the conventional wisdom suggests.

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The book draws copiously from police files, transcriptions of the X-witnesses' evidence, the findings of a parliamentary commission and other sources. Even if the way the X-witnesses testified seemed irrational, the authors say, many of the facts they described stand up to scrutiny.

The book asserts that the evidence indicates a huge effort by magistrates and senior police officials to demolish the testimony of the X-witnesses.

The authors infer from this evidence that there was considerable official interest in laying the blame for the pedophile scandal that exploded in 1996 entirely on Marc Dutroux, a convicted rapist and child abductor, who faces charges of kidnapping six young girls and murdering four of them. To admit otherwise, the authors argue, would have allowed the affair to threaten the stability of the nation, as it almost did when Mr. Dutroux stole the gun of a police guard in 1998 and escaped. That episode led to the resignation of two government ministers.

Judicial authorities are not allowed to comment publicly on the case, but a retired prosecutor, Judge Guy Poncelet, called the thesis of the book "brilliant and convincing." He said that "certain political and judicial authorities," with the help of the state radio and television and much of the press, had deliberately played down disturbing evidence uncovered in the Dutroux investigation.

Judge Poncelet's son, a police officer, was involved in another case in which Mr. Dutroux was implicated. He was investigating the trafficking of stolen cars in 1996 when he was shot and killed in an unsolved murder.

Since last year, Judge Poncelet said, there has been a "revisionist" current in Belgium, intended to restore confidence in the state after a chain of extraordinary crimes, including the Dutroux case, the murder of the Socialist leader Andre Cools, and an unsolved series of random murders at supermarkets.

The arrest of Mr. Dutroux in August 1996 brought a provincial prosecutor, Judge Jean-Marc Connerotte, to the world's attention. In rescuing two kidnapped girls from Mr. Dutroux's underground dungeon, the judge became a national hero.

To lead the investigation of Mr. Dutroux, Judge Connerotte brought in one of the National Gendarmerie's top officers, Patriek De Baets, and his team of investigators.

But a few weeks later, as 300,000 Belgians marched in a demonstration of national grief and solidarity, the country's highest legal authorities removed Judge Connerotte from the case because he had accepted an invitation from the grateful parents of the rescued girls to a fund-raising dinner for families of missing children.

In Belgium, prosecutors are supposed to remain strictly impartial. Nonetheless, Judge Connerotte's removal caused a national uproar. In his defense, the judge said he did not realize that the dinner was a fund-raiser.

Mr. De Baets was in charge of interrogating the X-witnesses after they volunteered to give information. The most controversial of them was a young woman originally known only as X1, but whose real name, it emerged, was Regina Louf.

Amid silence and tears during the course of several all-night interrogations, she poured out a terrifying tale of having been sold into prostitution by her grandmother and later introduced into a circle of orgies at which, she said, she had seen young children tortured and murdered.

The other X-witnesses, one of whom worked for the police, told similar stories of childhood abuse, and described hunts at which children were chased through woods with Dobermans.

Mr. De Baets, the book says, became convinced that the horrors Mrs. Louf dredged up from her memory corresponded to the truth. He had each of her statements checked out, and discovered that she had inexplicably detailed knowledge of the unsolved murders of two young women in the 1980s that supported the thesis of a conspiracy.

"We tried to find out if what she said was possible," Mr. De Baets later said, "and yes, it was possible."

According to the authors, senior magistrates and gendarmerie officials became concerned about the sweeping scope that the investigation was assuming and about the enormity of the evidence. They therefore initiated an inquiry into Mr. De Baets's handling of the case, which eventually consumed as much time and energy as the investigation itself.

"The suspicion grew that De Baets and others formed part of a sect bent on destabilizing the kingdom," the book says, adding that because of this, Mr. Baets and his colleagues were dropped from the investigation and sent home on indefinite leave.

In 1997, a judge charged Mr. De Baets with concealing the fact that Mrs. Louf had incorrectly identified the photograph of a murder victim, which would have seriously undermined her evidence. In fact, the authors said, the videotape of the interrogation showed that Mrs. Louf was deeply averse to looking at the photographs. It was later established that the missing piece of evidence, known as a proces verbal, had been in the files all along.

Mr. De Baets was exonerated this year. In November, two journalists from *Le Soir Illustré*, who were judged to have defamed him and four colleagues, were ordered to pay the gendarmes 2.2 million Belgian francs (\$55,000), plus costs. Mr. De Baets and his colleagues, however, remain on leave.

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THE "X-FILES" was written by two reporters from the newspaper *De Morgan*, Annemie Bulte and Douglas De Coninck, and a reporter from the weekly *Journal du Mardi*, Marie-Jeanne Van Heeswyck, who is appealing a 500,000-franc fine for revealing prosecution secrets.

The internal investigation into Mr. De Baets dragged on so long that its details were never passed to a parliamentary commission of inquiry into the Dutroux investigation. Even so, the commission, headed by the present justice minister, Marc Verwilghen, was scathing in its condemnation of

police inefficiency and the way in which prosecutors jealously kept information to themselves.

Mr. De Baets's superiors re-examined the transcripts of the interrogations of Mrs. Louf several times. The authors say the investigators had such a poor grasp of Dutch, in which the interviews were conducted, that they changed or misunderstood meanings in a way that discredited the witness.

Aime Bille, one of Mr. Baets's collaborators, said in a recent interview that Mrs. Louf's testimony corroborated details of cases on which gendarmes already were working. The discrediting of her evidence, Mr. Bille said, brought these investigations to a halt, meaning that the truth may never be discovered.

According to the book, the X-witnesses said that the prostitution, or worse, of children was commonplace. Mr. Bille tried to establish how many children had gone missing in Belgium. Several of the prosecutors' offices failed to reply, but the Brussels region reported that 1,300 minors disappeared between 1991 and 1996.

Mr. De Baets established that after several of the disappearances, Mr. Dutroux paid large sums of money into several bank accounts. Within four years of being released early from jail, where he had served time for rape and kidnapping, Mr. Dutroux — whose only official income was a welfare check — was worth an estimated 6 million francs, suggesting to investigators that he was acting for others higher up in a pedophile and prostitution ring.

Mr. De Coninck said that in researching the book, he and his fellow authors had become convinced that officials wanted to prove that Mr. Dutroux acted alone rather than as part of a conspiracy.

Mr. Dutroux will go on trial, probably in 2001, along with his wife, Michele Martin, and another alleged accomplice, Michel Lelievre. By that time the statute of limitations on most of the unsolved murders described in the book will have run out.

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