

Danielle Casanova, Communist Resistance Fighter, January 24th Convoy¹
by Marie Paule Hervieu

Danielle Casanova, a communist committed to political and military resistance, was deported in the convoy of January 24, 1943, to Auschwitz-Birkenau where she died of typhus on May 9, 1943.

Danielle Casanova was born on January 9, 1909, in Ajaccio². She was the third child of two politically republican, secular teachers. She changed her first and last name while attending dental school in Paris. Formerly Vincentella Périni, she became Danielle Casanova through her marriage, on December 12, 1933, to Laurent Casanova, an executive already involved in communist engagement.

The daughter of Corsican teachers, originally from the village of Piana in Southern Corsica, Danielle Casanova remained very loyal to her family, her region, and her culture. After secondary studies in Marseille, she decided in November 1927, to “go up” to Paris to study dentistry. She joined the Federal Students' Union³ in 1927 and the Communist Youth⁴ in 1928 and was elected department secretary. She also met Laurent Casanova, a law student and the son of a railway worker. Also, having attended one of the central schools of the Communist Party,⁵ she became a national youth leader, linked to the Communist International (KIM)⁶. Situated within the political culture of the Popular Front movements, the rallying of communists to leftist unions, and the creation of new possibilities for political identities: women and the middle class, Danielle Casanova participated in the creation of the Union of Young Girls of France (UJFF)⁷ on March 28, 1936, in Marseille. She was elected general secretary on December 26, 1936, alongside Jeannette Vermeersch-Thorez and Claudine Chomat.

She was heavily involved in efforts to aid the Spanish Republicans (massive milk collections for the children of besieged Madrid)⁸. Even after the Communist Party was banned on September 26, 1939, Casanova remained a leading, underground, executive and friend to communist intellectuals such as Paul and Henriette Nizan, Georges and Maï Politzer, Pierre Villon, and Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier. Casanova became involved in the first resistance actions, the Free University⁹ and the Free Thought movements, alongside these intellectuals.

Danielle Casanova clandestinely resumed political responsibilities, adapting to the new situation of military occupation. Beginning in the summer of 1940, she organized popular women's committees that held demonstrations for housewives, as well as aid committees for the wives of prisoners of war and political prisoners. Her husband, deployed until 1942, was taken as a prisoner of war. He attempted to escape several times and succeeded in early March 1942.

Active in the Organization of Armed Struggle (Spring - Summer 1942)

A woman of authority and experience, Danielle Casanova was tasked by the clandestine leadership of the Communist Party¹⁰ to strengthen the “military” resistance by involving Communist Youth activists in the armed struggle, through the creation of the “Youth Battalions” led by another escapee, Albert Ouzoulias (“Marc”). In the spring of 1942, the young Resistance fighters were integrated into the Francs-Tireurs et Partisans Français (FTP)¹¹. Starting in the summer of 1942, the FTP became the armed wing of the National Front for French independence and freedom.

Danielle Casanova continued to organize groups of women with, for example, Josette Cothias for the North, Yvonne Dumont for Normandy, and intellectuals involved in the Resistance in the Occupied Zone, such as her friends, George and Maï Politzer. These were also the last people she met with before her arrest: Josette Cothias, who would be arrested and

imprisoned in November 1942, and Félix Cadras, the secretary of the organization. On February 14, Daniella Casanova met with Cothias and Cadras near the Mirabeau bridge. She also saw Georges and Maï Politzer, when she brought some coal to their home at 170 bis on Rue de Grenelle.¹² The Politzer couple was also arrested and incarcerated in February 1942.

Arrested, imprisoned, and deported (February 15, 1942 - January 24, 1943)

Danielle Casanova was arrested by the first Special Brigade of the Paris police headquarters (Special Brigade No. 1)¹³ led by Commissioner Fernand David, in collaboration with the German police. Casanova's arrest came at the end of a long process that began in January 1942, when André Pican was identified. Pican was the former Communist Regional Leader of Seine-Inferior, who was responsible for the dissemination of the clandestine *L'Humanité*¹⁴. These detainments were part of a process of large-scale police operations that targeted the national political leadership of the Communist Party and resulted in nearly eighty arrests. These included political executives such as Arthur Dallidet, Félix Cadras, and Georges Dudach, as well as women involved at several levels of the organization: such as Danielle Casanova and Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier, Charlotte Delbo-Dudach, Maï Politzer, and members of the National University Front involved in intellectual resistance: Jacques Decour, Jacques Solomon—married to Hélène Langevin, who was also arrested—and Georges Politzer.

Danielle Casanova was first “housed” in her apartment on rue du Poteau, in the 18th *arrondissement*, then recognized as “Femme Balard”¹⁵ by the General Intelligence Inspector. After her meeting with Félix Cadras, on February 14, she was finally arrested with the Politzers, by six police inspectors, on February 15, 1942. The men were imprisoned, tortured, and shot at Mont-Valérien¹⁶ on May 23 and 30, 1942. The women were incarcerated and then deported on January 24, 1943.

Danielle Casanova was first sent to the police headquarters depot, where she stayed until March 23, 1942. She was then incarcerated in the Santé Prison.¹⁷ Casanova was placed in solitary confinement on three occasions, after having organized a women's demonstration against the starvation diet inflicted on the women who had supported those men who had been condemned to death. They broke the windows of their cells to talk to each other, to give each other news, and to sing "La Marseillaise" and "L'Internationale"¹⁸ for those who were going to be shot. On August 25, 1942, the group of women was transferred to Fort Romainville, a camp for political detainees, while awaiting deportation. There, Danielle Casanova resumed contact with the clandestine leadership of the PC and the staff of the FTPF. She served as the editor-in-chief of the Romainville Patriot¹⁹.

During her long months of imprisonment, she wrote and smuggled clandestine letters to her mother, through Victor Michaut's aunt, Célestine Garnier, who was one of the leaders of the Communist Resistance in the Free Zone.

On the eve of her deportation, she wrote one final letter from Romainville:

"Tomorrow: get up at 5 a.m. At 6 a.m. we will be searched, and then we will depart for Germany. We are 231 women: young, old, sick, and even infirm. Everyone's outfits are magnificent, and our beautiful "Marseillaise" has been heard on more than one occasion. What fate do they have in store for us? We have just read the press release. They have surrendered Stalingrad, yesterday they surrendered Veliki²⁰, tomorrow they will surrender Rostov. Victory is coming. We are proud to be French and Communists. We will never bow our heads; we live only for the fight. I am filled with the joy that comes from a heightened awareness of never having failed and from feeling this young and impetuous blood coursing through my veins..."

The deportation and death of Danielle Casanova (January 24, 1943 - May 9, 1943)

Danielle Casanova is a leading figure of the convoy of January 24, 1943,²¹ because she was a woman who was committed to political and military resistance, and because she was a communist. Casanova was one of the 119 deportees affiliated with the Communist Party (out of the 230 registered under the serial numbers in the "31,000" range), 85 of whom died during the deportation.

A resistant, communist activist and arrested as such, she remained so in the Birkenau camp, singing "La Marseillaise" to her comrades, which produced "a (rare) taste of freedom" among the internees, as Manca Zvalbova, an interned Czech doctor working at Revier, would later write. But Danielle Casanova, after being tattooed with the serial number 31655, was identified as the dentist that the supervisory staff of the camp authorities had been seeking, following the death of one of the dentists on duty from typhus. Therefore, she was not shaved, was not subject to forced labor or roll calls, and shared a room with beds with two assistants. She took advantage of this "exceptional" situation, to aid her deported comrades. As Charlotte Delbo writes: "Danielle remained close to us", especially since she contacted the clandestine Resistance, for example the German communist Gerda Schneider, Lagerälteste²² (inmate and Dean of the camp) or the Czech doctor.

At the Nuremberg Trials Marie Claude Vaillant-Couturier recounted the following: We learned, from the Jewish women who arrived from France around July 1944, that a major campaign had been carried out on the London radio where they talked about our transport, citing Maï Politzer, Danielle Casanova, Hélène Solomon-Langevin, and myself. As a result of this, we know that orders were given to Berlin to carry out the transport of French women under better conditions.

One of her deported comrades, Adélaïde Hautval, testified in her book *Medicine and Crimes Against Humanity*²³:

“I see Danielle after roll call. She is not with us, having been immediately placed in Revier where they urgently need a dental surgeon. I find her to be completely changed, pale, swollen and I know that she cried all night, aware of the fate that awaited her comrades. How does she manage? With a clear vision of the future and of possible circumstances, she creates a master plan for herself: finding “jobs” for them, stealing medicine for them, diverting food, taking from her own rations and above all bringing them safe and constant moral support, day after day. Until the end, Danielle would remain faithful to this agenda – always. And this loyalty would be the cause of her death (typhus) because out of all of us, she was the one who found herself in the most favorable living conditions.”

In fact, Danielle Casanova assisted in the recruitment of Maï Politzer, a professional midwife, to work as a doctor. She managed to place a dozen women as nurses, and others as seamstresses at military posts and annex camps (Rajsko) in which their lives were less at risk. As Charlotte Delbo recalls²⁴:

“Often in the evening, after roll call, she came to see us in Block 26 and distributed to each of us, one at a time, what she was able to procure through her connections. She brought bread, woolen fabric, a few charcoal tablets for those suffering from dysentery; too little, but it was priceless.”

Everyone was convinced that she would come back and tell her story, but the epidemic of exanthematic typhus got the better of her courage and her strength. Following the deaths of Maï Politzer (on March 6), Yvonne Blech, Henriette Schmidt, Raymonde Salez, and Rose Blanc, Danielle Casanova died on May 9, 1943, after a week of high fever and agony. She was 34 years old. The news of her death, experienced as a collective catastrophe, was sent to France in a letter from Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier.

Danielle Casanova became a heroine and a martyr.

*-Translated from the French and annotated by Tamsin Urbas, Scripps College
Edited by Julin Everett, Scripps College.*

Notes

¹ All annotations are the original work of the translator.

² Ajaccio is the capital of Corsica, a French island in the Mediterranean Sea. Part of the Corse-du-Sud department. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Ajaccio." Encyclopedia Britannica, 28 Jul. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com>. Accessed 1 March 2024.

³ The UNEF was a national union influenced by socialist ideology which was created by French students in 1907, with the goal of representing their interests to an international audience. Monchablon, Alain. "The Creation of the National Union of Students of France (UNEF) in 1907", *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, vol. 86, no. 2, 2007, pp. 5-9.

⁴ La Jeunesse Communiste (JC) was a youth organization used by the Communist Party to mobilize opposition against occupied France. Frader, L. L. "Review of Mobilizing Youth: Communists and Catholics in Interwar France, by Susan B. Whitney." *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 83, no. 4, 2011, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/JMH1633>.

⁵ The French Communist Party (PCF) established schools throughout the country as early as the 1920s. The goal of the curriculum was to indoctrinate students and to train potential organizers.

⁶ The Youth Communist International (KIM) was the organized youth faction of the Communist Party. It was the successor of the International Union of Socialist Youth Organizations. Cornell, Richard. *Revolutionary Vanguard: The Early Years of the Communist Youth International, 1914-1924*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1982. p. 9.

⁷ The Popular Front was an offshoot of the French Communist Party created to appeal to young women. It used traditional ideals of femininity to politicize young women - rather than appealing to the masses. Whitney, Susan B. "Embracing the Status Quo: French Communists, Young Women and the Popular Front." *Journal of Social History*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1996, pp. 29-53. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3789748>. Accessed 1 Mar. 2024.

⁸ Milk for Spain was a decentralized, international campaign to provide aid to communities in Spain. People in other countries could buy milk tokens, to send provisions into Spain. "'Milk for Spain' | Virtual Spanish Civil War." Virtual Museum of the Spanish Civil War, <https://vscw.ca>. Accessed 1 March 2024.

⁹ These movements emerged in the 19th century. Popularized by French liberals, they challenged the dominance of Catholic higher education. "Bibliothèque des Institutions Libres de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles - Historique." Bibliothèque des Institutions Libres de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles. <https://bib.ulb.be/fr>. Accessed 1 March 2024.

¹⁰ The original text written by Hervieu specifies that the clandestine leadership was made up of three men: Jacques Duclos, Benoît Frachon, Charles Tillon.

¹¹ French Riflemen and Partisans was the violent resistance wing of the National Front, made up of people who adamantly believed in the Resistance. It was created through the merger of three Communist resistance organizations. "EHRI - Francs-Tireurs et Partisans." EHRI Portal, https://portal.ehri-project.eu/authorities/ehri_cb-368. Accessed 1 March 2024.

¹² Rue de Grenelle is in the 7th arrondissement in Paris, very close to the Hotel des Invalides.

¹³ Special Brigade No. 1 was A service of the French police created with the goal of repressing Communist activities and capturing resistance fighters. They worked with German forces by handing over all who were captured. Wieviorka, Olivier, and Jane Marie Todd. *The French Resistance*. Harvard University Press, 2016. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjhzs1t>. Accessed 2 Mar. 2024.

¹⁴ *L'Humanité* was a newspaper located in Paris, under Communist control in the 20s. Forced to publish secretly during WW2. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "L'Humanité." Encyclopedia Britannica, 27 Dec. 2017, <https://www.britannica.com>. Accessed 1 March 2024.

¹⁵ Members of the Resistance who were being investigated by French authorities were often given code names indicating physical attributes or places frequented. Casanova would have been called "Femme Balard" because she was

spotted at the Metro station Ballard, located in the 15th arrondissement. Pierre Durand. *Danielle Casanova: l'indomptable*. Paris: Messidor, 1990, 182-129. Bibliothèque Nationale de France. <https://gallica.bnf.fr>. Accessed 29 June, 2024.

¹⁶ “Mont-Valérien” was a former military fortress in the West of Paris. The main execution spot in France used by the German army during WW2. “Mont-Valérien.” VisitParisRegion, <https://www.visitparisregion.com>. Accessed 1 March 2024.

¹⁷ Santé Prison was located on Rue de la Santé, in the Montparnasse neighborhood of Paris. It was opened in 1867 and still in use today. “Justice / Annuaire et contacts / La Santé.” Annuaire Justice, 15 December 2006, <http://www.annuaire.justice.gouv.fr>. Accessed 1 March 2024.

¹⁸ L’Internationale was an Anthem of working class, communist groups. de Mello, Michele. “What is the origin of The Internationale?” Peoples Dispatch, 3 May 2022, <https://peoplesdispatch.org>. Accessed 1 March 2024.

¹⁹ *Le Patriot* was a clandestine newspaper written by Casanova. de Bausset, Laure. “Danielle Casanova (1909-1943).” Musée de La Résistance En Ligne. www.museedelaresistanceenligne.org Accessed 11 May 2024.

²⁰ Veliki Preslav is a town in Eastern Bulgaria. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. “Veliki Preslav”. Encyclopedia Britannica, 31 Jul. 2013, <https://www.britannica.com>. Accessed 10 May 2024.

²¹ The convoy of January 24, 1943, travelled from Romainville to the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. “Hommage au convoi des 31000 - Mairie de Romainville.” Ville de Romainville, <https://www.ville-romainville.fr>. Accessed 1 March 2024.

²² The Lagerälteste was a camp elder who was employed to assign duties in German camps. Aldebert, Bernard. “The System of Prisoner Functionaries.” KZ-Gedenkstätte Mauthausen, <https://www.mauthausen-memorial.org>. Accessed 1 March 2024.

²³ See Adélaïde Hautval, Claire Ambroselli and Anise Postel-Vinay. *Médecine et crimes contre l’humanité*. Actes Sud, 1991.

²⁴ See Charlotte Delbo. *Auschwitz et Après: Aucun de nous ne reviendra*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1965.