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The "Inexplicable Vendée:" State Terror and Civil War as Products of Nationalism in the French Revolution 1793-1796

By

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After seven months of failed counter-insurgency efforts, Bertrand Barère had seen enough. On 1 October 1793, he complained to the National Convention in Paris that "The inexplicable Vendée still exists, and the republican efforts have up to the present moment been powerless against its brigandry and royalist conspiracies." Barère denounced the Vendée as "a crucible wherein the national population is purified," suggesting that it "should have been annihilated long ago" because it "still threatens to become a dangerous volcano [of sedition.]" Despite being poorly supplied in terms of gunpowder and artillery, this "band of fanatics who call themselves the Catholic Royal Army appear to be a matter of little concern one day but appears formidable the next; when they are defeated, they become invisible, in victory, they are enormous." After reviewing a string of recent rebel victories, Barère concluded the only solution was the complete destruction of the region to strike fear into France's internal and external enemies. "Destroy the Vendée, Valenciennes and Condé will no longer be under Austrian control. Destroy the Vendée, the British will be driven out of Dunkirk. Destroy the Vendée, the Rhine will be liberated from the Prussians." Moreover, "each blow you deal to the Vendée will be felt in the rebelling villages, in the federalist departments, and on our invaded frontiers. The Vendée and again the Vendée! Such is the political ulcer devouring the heart of the French Republic." The Convention received Barère's remarks with thunderous applause and passed a decree to immediately increase republican military presence in the Vendée with the hope of bring a swift end to the civil war.[1]

Shocking as such violent rhetoric may be, Barère was addressing a nation in crisis. After the initial wave of euphoric enthusiasm that characterized the early days of the Revolution, a series of political and military disasters led to the collapse of the revolutionary consensus. In 1791,

[1] Bertrand Barère, 1 October 1793 in the National Convention. https://sul-philologic.stanford.edu/philologic/archparl/navigate/76/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/430/

France enacted its first constitution, limiting the power of the king and establishing a democratically elected legislature to restrict his power. However, this new political order also included an anti-clerical reform called the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which required French clergymen to swear an oath to the constitution instead of the Vatican. Such measures outraged conservatives in many departments of western France, who deeply resented priests in their own communities that took the constitutional oath. Later that year, Louis XVI blundered horribly by attempting unsuccessfully to escape to the custody of the Austrians, hoping to negotiate from safety a more powerful position for himself. Outrage and rumors about foreign conspiracies to destroy the Revolution culminated in a French declaration of war on Austria on 20 April 1792.

It quickly became apparent that France had stumbled into disaster. Austria was promptly joined by Prussia, and by 1793 France faced a coalition of powers that expanded to include Great Britain, Spain, Sardinia and Naples. To make matters worse, French aristocrats began fleeing the country en masse as the Revolution became more radical, leaving the officer core of the army in shambles. Popular insurrection on 10 August 1792 overthrew the king and in September the Legislative Assembly voted to abolish the monarchy and establish the First French Republic. Louis XVI found himself at the guillotine just a few months later on 21 January 1793, fueling more discontent among the conservative peasant populations of western France. Tensions boiled over after the young Republic's declaration of a military conscription program to raise an army for the defense of the Revolution against all Europe. In March, in resistance to conscription efforts, the western department known as the Vendée exploded into a revolt that would in the coming months become wholesale civil war engulfing much of western France. It had become

clear to the leadership in Paris that anything less than total mobilization would be insufficient to save Revolutionary France from its adversaries.

The War in the Vendée is among the most controversial aspects of the Revolution's legacy because of the brutal methods the government employed to suppress the rebels. As the Revolution became more radical, violent rhetoric targeted not only foreigners but French citizens who were viewed as traitors to the Revolution and thus had forfeited their rights. This culminated in the advent of the Terror and calls for a massive campaign of violence to suppress rebels in the Vendée and elsewhere in France. Historians continue to debate the degree to which this violence was driven by the dire circumstances of total war or something inherent in the revolutionary ideology. As Michael Rapport has remarked, more recent historiography seeks to explain the calls for violence against those perceived as no longer "French" on ideological grounds in lieu of Albert Mathiez's old thesis of circumstances. [2] One recent work which embodies this trend is Dan Edelstein's *Terror of Natural Right*, in which he argues that the violence of the Terror is more a product of the revolutionaries' obsession with natural law than the circumstances of the war against Europe and the Vendée. Edelstein maintains that the Jacobins, in their infatuation with the cult of nature, "drew on natural rights to authorize and draft the laws of the Terror." This allowed them to "exercise terror while appearing faithful to the principles of the 1789 declaration of rights."[3]

This study seeks to complicate the classic dichotomy of circumstance and ideology by identifying another driving force of the Revolution: nationalism. From the onset of the French Revolution its most important ethos was the idea that the French people had a right to statehood

[2] Michael Rapport, *Nationality and Citizenship in Revolutionary France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5-7.
[3] Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 4.

and sovereignty, which they did not possess under the Ancien Régime. In this sense, the Revolution was a nation-building experiment. The nationalism of 1789, however, was fundamentally different from that of 1793-94, and after the end of the Terror the ethos of revolutionary nationalism changed once again. Among the most important catalysts for this change in the ideology was the military situation. When France faced external war against all Europe and civil war within its borders, the principles of 1789 were no longer enough. It now became necessary for the nation to mobilize itself for total war to ensure its survival. Thus, it seems erroneous to completely divorce the revolutionary ideology from the tempestuous political and military crises of 1792-94.

Consequently, this study will trace the development of French nationalism from 1789 through the period of Terror, assessing its effects on the conduct of warfare in the Vendée. First, I will establish the Revolution as a nation-building project beginning in 1789 but taking a radically exclusionary and violent turn after 1792, moderating itself again after the Terror. Next, I will review the ways that the leading newspaper, the pro-government *Moniteur*, helped forge an image of the Vendée as a backwards, unenlightened cesspool of fanaticism to justify atrocities against undesirables in the war. I will then discuss the conduct of the war during the Terror and then the period from 9 Thermidor year II to 1796, highlighting that the change in the ethos of the nation after the end of the Terror rendered the conduct of the latter period much less brutal. Finally, I will engage with the historiography on the Vendée and discuss the implications of this interpretation of the war for its legacy in the broader context of the Revolution's political developments. In so doing, I argue that the violence in the Vendée was part of this political program of nation-building and that those killed in the war represent perhaps the earliest victims of exclusionary nationalist violence in Europe.

Additionally, it is useful to view this conflict through the lens of Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz's concept of war as an extension of politics by other means. Clausewitz argues that since war is an extension of politics, political concerns profoundly affect the way war is conducted. In his seminal *On War*, he insists that "war is an instrument of policy… The conduct of war, in its great outlines, is therefore policy itself, which takes up the sword in place of the pen."[4] The policy of nation building had two important facets, one of which is very straightforward and the other more vague. First and foremost, the policy's objective was to maintain the sovereignty of the new French nation-state against its perceived enemies. Given the precarious military situation, it is unsurprising that the fragile republic was willing to employ state terror to demoralize the Vendean rebels and force them into surrender. However, another element of the experiment also impacted the conduct of the war: the revolutionaries' desire to create cultural and ideological unity in the new state. Particularly during the Terror, the government was motivated by its belief that there was something uniquely counterrevolutionary about the Vendée and its supposed culture that necessitated an ideological purge. For example, violence committed against priests and the various dechristianization efforts seem to have been a product such a belief. As we shall see, however, not only did much of national leadership disagree with dechristianization, but in some instances they actively opposed these tendencies, which were mainly associated with the radical Hébertists in Paris. Moreover, although belief in the Vendée as a nexus of counterrevolution motivated much of the violence against civilians, it is not clear exactly how many people the state was willing to kill to realize the dream of a homogenous nation. What seems evident, however, is that the state viewed these people as

[4] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989), 610.

cultural and ideological undesirables against whom violence was necessary to preserve the purity of the Republic.

On the eve of the meeting of the Estates-General in 1789, Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès expressed the key problem facing the French nation. The famous opening lines of his seminal revolutionary pamphlet *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-État* read: "What is the Third Estate? Everything. What has it hitherto been in the political order? Nothing. What does it ask? To become something."[5] With remarkably simple language, Sieyès captures here a very powerful sentiment: the desire for statehood. The Third Estate, which comprised the entirety of the French population minus the nobility and clergy, were a nation without a state. Despite being "everything", the great mass of the population had no means of wielding their sovereignty because it rested solely with the crown. Sieyès then documents the ways that the Third Estate was excluded from all aspects of public life, inquiring, "if this exclusion is a social crime against Third Estate, if it is a veritable hostility, can we at least say that it contributes to the public good?" He responds in the negative, deriding the social structure of Ancien Régime society as an illegitimate monopoly of power in the hands of the nobility and clergy, who do not deserve it.[6]

Since all the posts and the affairs of state are dominated by those who have not earned them, Sieyès concludes that noble privileges must be abolished to allow the Third Estate to reach its full potential. "Who would dare deny that the Third Estate has in it everything that is necessary to constitute a complete Nation?... If we abolished the privileged order the nation would not be anything less, but in fact something greater."[7] Sieyès defines a nation as "a living body of associates under a *common* law, represented by the same *legislature*."[8] As we shall see, the

[5] Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-État*, (Geneva, Librarie Droz, 1970), 119.
[6] *Ibid.,* 122.
[7] Sieyès, *Tiers État,* 124.
[8] *Ibid*., 126.

difficulty of establishing a "common law" was exposed as the nation descended into civil war in 1793.

In 1789, however, nothing in Sieyès' rhetoric implies the need for violence or civil war. He was not calling for a purge to cleanse the nation from its enemies. His pamphlet is a simple but clear demand for statehood. The Third Estate, relegated to the status of "nothing," sought a representative government wherein they could implement political will of the nation. The ethos of the "nation" here is clear enough: allow the Third Estate to represent themselves in a body that protects them from the despotism of the king and the aristocracy. With the start of the Revolution and advent of the National Assembly just a few months after Sieyès published his pamphlet, the Third Estate had finally acquired the statehood they so longed for. However, they quickly realized the new state's fragility, and the old fear of despotism's return never left the revolutionaries, even as they transitioned to new governments and constitutions. Furthermore, as the circumstances of total war radicalized the Revolution, those who constituted the "nation" dwindled in number and became suspected of aiding those who would bring back despotism.

By 1792, the leaders of the Revolution faced a new problem: that of maintaining the French nation's sovereignty against foreign threats. After Louis XVI's catastrophic Flight to Varennes, many figures in the government, especially members of the center-left Girondin faction began spreading violent nationalist rhetoric to advocate preventive war against Austria. The most articulate leader of the war party was Jacques-Pierre Brissot, who engaged in a famous series of debates on the war in the Jacobin Club against Maximilien Robespierre. On 20 January, Brissot fervently denounced emperor Leopold II as a threat to the survival of the French nation. He accused Leopold of being "in a state of open hostility against us." Brissot remarked that the emperor, "through treaties that he has signed with foreign powers", "announced that there exists

now a crowned league against French sovereignty." Moreover, "since the beginning of the French Revolution the emperor has constantly violated the treaty of 1756, which we can now regard as null and void." Consequently, "it is impossible for the French people to maintain their liberty as long as there exists a treaty between the court of France and the emperor." Brissot concluded that war was inevitable, arguing that "whether we go on the offensive or wage a defensive war it better that the theater be on foreign soil rather than our own." "Either the Emperor does not want war, or he does not want it yet. If he does not want it yet, we must strike first, and it he does not want it at all, we must make war against him anyways to achieve our complete satisfaction."[9] Brissot's speech, although not as exclusionary in rhetoric as some that came later, represents a violent shift in the ethos of revolutionary nationalism. The task of the nation-state now included not only protection from royal despotism, but preventive violence against other nations suspected of conspiring against French liberty.

On 20 April 1792 Brissot got his wish, as the Legislative Assembly voted to declare war on Austria amidst a wave of euphoric idealism. The speeches delivered in the Assembly that day reflect the new belief that the interests of the nation and the state were the same. Girondin leader Pierre Victurnien Vergniaud proclaimed to the deputies that "you owe to the nation, to its happiness, to its glory," to declare war on Austria and defend the Revolution. He did not stop there. "Give to France, to Europe, to the whole world, the imposing spectacle of our national character; reanimate this energy before which bastilles fall." Vergniaud believed the French had a right to export the principles of the Revolution because he saw something unique in the French character. "Let us give new life to the burning sentiment that attaches *us* to liberty and to the fatherland (*patrie*), make every corner of Europe feel the power of these sublime words: 'live

[9] *Journal des Débats et de la Correspondance de la Société des Amis de la Constitution, Séante aux Jacobins à Paris,* 20 January 1792.

free or die!'" Finally, "when the fatherland is in danger, we are all united by our unanimous passion, ready to save it or to die trying… Our enemies may well insult our corpses, but they will not bound one single Frenchman in their chains."[10] Not only did the state now have a responsibility to defend the principles of the Revolution, but it is also tasked with preserving the French national character. As we shall see from the press coverage, this framing of the Revolutionary Wars as a existential battle between freedom and slavery had enormous implications for the conduct of the civil war in the Vendée. The press would employ this very framing to present the Vendée as a cesspool of royalist slavery that needed to be destroyed.

Reality quickly set in and dispelled the Girondin's idealistic dream of exporting the Revolution across Europe. Despite initial success, the military situation continued to worsen over the following months. On 2 September 1792, Georges-Jacques Danton gave a characteristically fiery speech outlining the need for wartime mobilization. Attempting to foster some enthusiasm, Danton remarked that "the ministers of a free people" have the responsibility "to announce that the fatherland (*patrie*) will be saved." They must invite "the citizens to love one another and march for the defense of the fatherland… It is in this moment that the National Assembly will become a veritable committee of war." To thunderous applause, Danton demanded that "anyone who refuses to personally serve or turn in their weapons to those who will serve [must] be put to death." He reassured the deputies, stating that "the bell we will ring is not an alarm signal, it is simply the charge against the enemies of the fatherland. To defeat them, gentlemen, we need audacity, more audacity, always audacity, and France will be saved." The deputies then passed a decree declaring that "anyone who refuses to serve personally or hand over their weapons to those who wish to march against the enemy will be declared ignoble traitors to the fatherland

[10] Pierre Victurnien Vergniaud, 20 April 1792, Legislative Assembly, Paris, France. https://sul-philologic.stanford.edu/philologic/archparl/navigate/42/2/9/

who deserve the death penalty."[11] Although the army was at this point still recruiting on a voluntary basis, Danton's speech and the subsequent decree made clear that French citizens were expected to contribute to the war effort and that failure to comply was punishable by death. A few months later, the government began implementing wholesale military conscription to raise an army for the defense of France against all Europe and the hatred for those who refused to support the war effort only intensified.

Given that the nation-state now expected military service from its citizens, it is no surprise that the leadership in Paris was outraged upon learning in March 1793 that the Vendée had erupted in revolt, refusing to accept conscription. Unsurprisingly, among the first men who understood the dangerous potential of not suppressing this rebellion was a certain Bertrand Barère. On 17 March, just a few days after the outbreak of the revolt, Barère delivered the first of his many reports to the Convention on the dangers of counter-revolution. He accused the rebels of employing "the language of excessive patriotism, to ferment unrest." Priests were the worst offenders. Barère denounced them as "irreconcilable enemies of the Republic; because combined with fanaticism liberty would be but a chimera." He warned the deputies that "You still have to foil the hopes of this other class of men who observe the inaction of you and the people." Moreover, "It is a foreign party, a stalking party that observes your movements to take advantage of them… you must have no doubt about the existence and collusion of these different conspirators." Barère also declared for the first time that "we know that in the department of the Vendée, a band of fanatics is in open counter-revolution." He proceeded predict with remarkable

[11] Georges-Jacques Danton, 2 September 1792, Legislative Assembly, Paris, France. https://sul-philologic.stanford.edu/philologic/archparl/navigate/49/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/213/?byte=1963351&byte=1963354&byte=1963359&byte=1963364&byte=1963367&byte=1963371

accuracy that failure to quiet the uprising now would allow "the bloody flag of the revolt and counter-revolution [to] spread to all the departments of Brittany.[12]

Later in his speech, Barère displayed his disdain for those who chose to be partisans of the Ancien Régime. After convincing the Convention to decree the death penalty for anyone who advocates of so-called "agrarian law," he proposed the same measure against monarchists. "If you decreed, with similar enthusiasm, the death penalty against anyone who proposes the reestablishment of royalty… it would prevent further subversion of society." The Convention cheered Barère's suggestion and passed the decree. [13] Here again those who constitute the nation appeared far fewer in number. The state made execution of those who refused to support the war effort and those who expressed support for the return of monarchy its official policy. As terror became official policy just a few weeks later, such violent rhetoric translated into violent reality. Even as early as March 1793, however, Barère seems to see here something in the character of this region that necessitates the use of extreme force to prevent the spread of counterrevolution. His speech also represents an early example of the revolutionaries' desire for ideological homogeneity.

So began the young Republic's obsession with the 'inexplicable Vendée.' But what did Barère mean when he called for its destruction in his 1 October 1793 speech? Jean-Clément Martin documents in *La. Vendée et la France* that the Vendée was not an ideologically homogenous region. Despite the large concentration of "whites" who decided to join the rebels in the Royal Catholic Army, there remained in the Vendée a good many "blues" who supported the Republic.[14] Despite this, after a string of early victories over poorly led and supplied republican

[12] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 20 March 1793.
[13] *Ibid*.
[14] Jean-Clément Martin, *La Vendée et la France* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1987), 98-100.

armies, they managed to establish their own de facto administration with the tentative support of the locals. On 26 March, they founded the *Conseil supérieur de Châtillon-sur-Sèvre* to enforce homogeneity and coherence in the territories captured by the rebels, though it was only to last until October. [15] Over the course of summer 1793, the rebels captured printing presses, began spreading their manifestos and propaganda, and reporting on republican atrocities. On 17 June, they published a 'call to the French people' with two primary objectives: "restore and conserve the Catholic religion and restore the monarchy." They soon began regularly publishing their proclamations under the title *Bulletin of the Conseil supérieur*, later renamed *Bulletin of the Friends of the Monarchy and Religion*.[16]

The rebels' attempt to forge a regional identity of counterrevolution had disastrous ramifications for their standing in the eyes of the government in Paris. Politicians like Barère became obsessed with the image of the Vendée as a hotbed of sedition. From the perspective of the Republic, who was attempting to foster a political culture based on democratic legitimacy, it was categorically unacceptable that a band of brigands in the Vendée were attempting to revive the political symbols and traditions of the old church and monarchy. In his call for the destruction of the 'inexplicable Vendée,' Barère seems to have meant the destruction of this mythical conception of the region. He saw himself as an arbiter of liberty in the epic struggle between revolutionary democracy and royalist Catholic superstition. The Jacobin government never escaped their fantastical perceptions of the Vendée's supposed status as the unified nexus of all the Revolution's enemies. As Martin points out, the worst of the killings against civilians occurred not during the turbulent early period of the war but after the crushing republican

[15] *Ibid.,*107.
[16] *Ibid.,*115.

victories in the fall and winter of 1793. The Vendée, "despite everything, was conceived as the region of revolt and counterrevolution, as a region that existed independent from France."[17]

To justify this violence, which seemed to contradict the constitution and principles of the Revolution, Barère invoked the language of extraordinary circumstances. He insisted in his 17 March speech that the deputies had a patriotic responsibility to act as a truly revolutionary government. "One part of the Assembly believes itself to be in wholesale revolution, while the other does not… In the rapid course of revolutions, the latter group is stationary. They conduct themselves according to the law of ordinary times." Barère thought this erroneous because revolutionaries, with their extra energy, act with more decision during these "momentary crises." He presented a classical metaphor to prove his point. "Cato, amidst agitations in Rome, wanted only to follow the established laws of peaceful times; he was not a revolutionary." Barère's hypothetical Cicero instructs Cato that "virtue and wisdom cause you to forget that we are not in ordinary times. When our vessel is sinking from the storm, we must save ourselves by any means necessary."[18] Mere weeks before the beginning of the Terror, Barère outlined here its most important principle: the suspension of the rule of law as a measure of security.

Although this principle is often associated with the theories of older states in the work of theorists like Machiavelli, one can find it in modern state theory as well. The revolutionary government's behavior during the Terror is remarkably consistent with German legal theorist Carl Schmitt's concept of the "state of exception." In *Legality and Legitimacy*, Schmitt analyzes the constitution of the Weimar Republic in the turbulent year of 1932, presenting an interpretation of the constitution under which "extraordinary lawgivers" could employ extra-

[17] Martin, *La Vendée*,187.
[18] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 20 March 1793.

legal methods to prevent the Republic from collapse.[19] He focuses on the vague article 48 of the Weimar constitution, which he interprets as providing dictatorial powers to an executive in times of crisis. Schmitt argues that article 48 "grants to this extraordinary lawmaker the unusual authority to set aside even fundamental rights." This cannot, however, be done formally. There must be "a sufficient and legally effective announcement of the intention to set aside the previously mentioned fundamental rights." Why would the legislature ever accept such extreme measures? Schmitt proposes that "If the parliamentary legislative state typically permits a "state of exception with the suspension of basic rights," they do so not to allow the dictator to overpower them, "but to create the freedom to issue measures that are necessary and effective."[20] In reality, however, the extraordinary lawmaker can override the parliament, as their privileges now include "the power to issue decrees with the force of law."[21]

To maintain the façade of legality, the dictator must derive their power from a confidence vote in the legislature. They maintain their authority "only so long as the parliamentary legislature tolerates it, that is, the parliament makes no use of its right to demand that measures be rescinded and also does not cast a no confidence vote."[22] Revolutionary France had no dictator, but it did have a body of twelve "exceptional lawgivers": the Committee of Public Safety. Composed of men like Barère and Maximilien Robespierre, the Committee served as the extremely powerful executive during the Terror, effectively governing the country by decree. The National Convention had to periodically vote to renew the Committee's power, but it was the twelve men on the Committee who shaped and decreed the policies of the Terror, although, as we shall see,

[19] It bears mentioning that Schmitt, a Nazi sympathizer, might also have intended this theoretical interpretation to serve as a means by which the Nazis could overthrow the Republic. I present it here, however, as a legitimate theory of preservation in times of crisis.
[20] Carl Schmitt, *Legality and Legitimacy*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 71-2.
[21] *Ibid.*, 76.
[22] *Ibid.*, 86-7

they faced some challenges to their control of the war effort. Almost two centuries before Schmitt published his work, the French Republic would save itself from collapse using remarkably similar principles to those he recommended to the Weimar Republic. When they declared terror the order of the day, the revolutionary leadership simply codified into law the principle of striking fear into the nation's enemies until it was able to overcome the dire circumstances of total war. However, in the minds of the revolutionaries, the "state of exception" would outlast the actual dangers in the Vendée, leading to brutal reprisals against the rebels as well as civilians long after there was any circumstantial justification for them.

It is now apposite to consider the ways that the press coverage of the war aided the revolutionary government in forging the image of the Vendée as the nexus of the Revolution's enemies. Although not yet the state-run outlet it would become under Napoleon's regime, the *Moniteur* did serve as the official recording of the government's proceedings. Despite operating during a time of strict censorship during the Terror, the *Moniteur* is remarkably objective in its presentation of the state's policies and debates in the Convention. As Jeremy D. Popkin argues, it combined "parliamentary and extraparliamentary news successfully enough to establish itself as Revolutionary France's newspaper of record" and survive under all the regimes of the Revolution.[23]

Two primary trends in the coverage illustrate the attempt to create an image of the Vendée as a cesspool of counterrevolution. First, many reports in the *Moniteur*, particularly in the early months of the war, focus as much on the presence of rebellious symbols in the Vendée as much as the military operations. Additionally, the journal continually presents the war as an existential struggle between classical republican liberty and the apparently enslaved fanaticism of the

[23] Jeremy D. Popkin, *Revolutionary News: The Press in France 1789-1799*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), 110.

rebels. This narrative elevates the status of the Vendée to the nexus of all the nation's enemies. They appear to be everywhere, from western France to the Catholic sections of Paris. All the coverage in the *Moniteur* elucidates the government's fanatical obsession with the Vendée and presents this view to the public to be consumed as news.

The *Moniteur* first mentions the revolt in the edition of 19 March 1793 in a report on the Convention's proceedings from the day before. A letter read in the Convention announced to the deputies that "counterrevolutionaries have assembled themselves in huge numbers and seized the muskets and canons from their local municipalities. They captured Chollet, which they proceeded to burn to the ground." After briefly mentioning that local administrative officials in the Vendée forced the rebels to retreat to Saint-Fulgent, the report changed focus. Locals noted that the fleeing rebels "looked like émigrés and were wearing the white bonnet [of the monarchy], crying 'Long live the king! We act in the name of France's rightful ruler."[24] While it is certainly possible that these brigands were émigrés, the letter provides no evidence besides the eyewitness testimony of the local officials. Whether the report is accurate or not, it is significant that the very first mention of the conflict in the country's largest newspaper already painted it as an aristocratic, not a popular revolt. Furthermore, the focus on the symbols of counterrevolution like the white bonnet of the Bourbons intensified greatly in the coming months, becoming increasingly violent.

On 2 May, the paper printed another report that was read into the Convention record and included in the official bulletin. A battalion of republican troops noticed a band of rebels in a village near Saint-Hermand. They remarked that "the village was flying the white flag, and that 1500 rebels were inside." With their "patriotism and courage," the soldiers "dispersed the

[24] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 19 March 1793.

counterrevolutionaries" and proceeded to "climb the bell tower on which the flag was hoisted, sever the chords of the bell and shred to pieces the symbol of the rebellion."[25] This report is particularly interesting because, in addition to highlighting the symbols of the counterrevolution associated with the Vendée, it shifts the violence onto them. The rebels themselves were simply "dispersed" while the seditious symbol was "shredded to pieces." Such a linguistic decision shifts the focus away from humans and onto inanimate objects, creating the impression that the violence was directed towards vague symbols rather than human beings.

The 'Politique' section on the front page of 30 June's edition mocks the rebels' belief in the divine right and hereditary succession of kings. In particular, the piece pokes fun at the manifestos the rebels were publishing in their *Bulletin du Conseil supérieur*. They laughed at the Vendeans for declaring themselves "in support of that pretend king Louis XVII. This nonsense will not persuade anyone and can only be considered a monument of fanaticism. It would be an insult to the people to think they were in danger of falling for these hypocritical royalist productions."[26] The tone of the last sentence illuminates the degree to which the citizens of the Vendée were no longer considered part of 'the people.' True French citizens were supposed to be capable of understanding that the age of hereditary monarchy had passed. Anyone who might be convinced by the royalist manifesto appears here to be a "fanatic" rather than a Frenchman. As we will see, using such vague language to describe the Revolution's enemies had serious implications for the conduct of the war, during which the republican soldiers committed violence against supposedly "fanatical" civilians.

The *Moniteur* also sometimes identified religious symbols as suspicious and synonymous with the royalist counterrevolution. A letter from General Louis Marie Turreau printed on 7 July

[25] *Le Moniteur Universel, 2 May 1793.*
[26] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 30 June 1793.

informed the Convention that the republican forces had captured Saumur but warns that the presence of counterrevolutionary symbols could be useful to Vendean army. Turreau recounted that when the republicans entered the city, they noticed that "white cockades had been hung up to signal that rebels could safely enter the city." Many of the inhabitants, who he described as "knights of Saint-Louis," had chosen to decorate their homes with Catholic crosses, while "others wrote the word royalist on their doors." This was a matter of great concern to Turreau, he wrote to the convention that "We have also established a surveillance committee charged with discovering, by all possible means, the counterrevolutionaries who serve the cause of the Catholic army with this criminal intelligence." He assured the Convention that "we will neglect nothing that might save the Republic and satisfy the national vengeance."[27] This type of reporting would give the reader of the *Moniteur* the impression that the Catholic church was not only an integral part of the effort to destroy the Revolution, but that they were so sophisticated as to have a network of symbolic communication to coordinate the Vendean war effort.

The most important role the *Moniteur* served, however, was the presentation of the war as an existential duel between freedom-loving republicans and superstitious Catholic monarchists who wanted France to return to the slavery of the Ancien Régime. This, more than anything else, helped to define the Vendée as a land of fanaticism whose existence was incompatible with the survival of the new French nation-state. During the chaotic early months of the war, the *Moniteur* presented this dichotomy by focusing on the role of priests as agents of counterrevolution. The newspaper also peddled the government's narrative of the 'second Vendée'- its fear that the revolt would spread across France, even to Paris. Finally, after the tide of the war turned in favor of the Republic, the *Moniteur* began printing reports that celebrated

[27] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 7 July 1793.

this victory, cheering on the destruction of the Vendée and the brutal reprisals meted out to the counterrevolutionaries.

On 23 June 1793, the *Moniteur*'s report on the National Convention's proceedings included a speech delivered by a deputy on behalf of a sans-culottes club from Metz. In his speech, the deputy informed the Convention that the citizens of Metz were very concerned about the events in the Vendée. In order to protect the unity of the Republic, the sans-culottes of Metz concluded it was necessary to "strike down this impure horde and expel from the free world these vile partisans of tyranny and fanaticism." The deputy assured the Convention that the people of Metz were good patriots, and that they "can count on their inviolable attachment to the cause of liberty, and to the Republic one and indivisible."[28]

Such reports were very common. The issue of 26 June printed a speech from the famous artist Jacques-Louis David in which he framed the war as a romantic struggle between patriotic Frenchman and those who sought to destroy France's fraternal unity. "Tears will streak down our faces as we march together; instead of the fratricide cause [of our enemies], there will exist between us no other cause than that of patriotism and courage, and we will be invincible, because liberty fights on our side."[29] A statement from Barère printed on 29 July even accuses royalism of infiltrating the Republican army. He argued that the Republican generals had failed to maintain proper discipline and ideology among their men. "It is royalism in Paris, that has rallied these men… who are the shame of the army, which they dishonor with their misconduct and cowardice." Among them Barère found "cowards, deserters, and looters. The administrators do not do their jobs, the soldiers are often lacking supplies." He was frustrated by the ideological heterogeneity among the troops, complaining that there were "men who want a king and ferment

[28] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 23 June 1793.
[29] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 26 June 1793.

disorder, and others who want Republicanism and discipline, but we are not enforcing discipline. That is the fault of the generals." Barère criticized the generals further for "preserving the spirit of the Ancien Régime, which reveres the names of saints or contemporary men who help to nourish fanaticism." The army needed, Barère suggested, "to be instilled with classical (*ancien*) and virtuous republicanism instead." He concluded that "you will never gain military advantage over the rebels as long as you fight war in their manner. "Instead of "hiding in the woods" like the rebels, Barère insisted that the republican troops must "burn down their homes and flatten out the terrain."[30] Just three day later, the Convention took Barère's advice and decreed the burning of Vendean villages their official strategy.

The coverage of the *Moniteur* also focused on the supposed character of the Vendean rebels. Another of Barère's reports printed on 17 August recounts the story of a "hideous spectacle" during which a deputy from the Convention who had been captured by the rebels "was mutilated and cut into pieces by the fanatics and nobles solely for having been a member in a national assembly." Barère had no kind words for the Vendeans. He inquired if "those who are not energized by the needs of the fatherland (*patrie*)… favor a society of ferocious beasts? Do they revel in France's destruction by these cannibals who wear the uniforms of dethroned kings?"[31] Barère was quoted yet again on 20 September, celebrating a recent Republican victory by denouncing the rebels as "our cowardly domestic enemies, these inveterate monarchists, the classical (*anciens*) slaves of kings."[32] The *Moniteur* also reinforced this image of the Vendée by projecting it onto other areas of France as other revolts sprouted across the country. The issue of 27 November compares federalist Toulon to the Vendée, decrying the city as "This hideous

[30] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 29 July 1793.
[31] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 17 August 1793.
[32] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 20 September 1793.

Vendée of the Midi, this last hope of kings." The same report reminded the reader that the Vendée is "nourished by aristocratic spirit and fattened by backwards peasants and fanatical priests."[33] This kind of coverage enabled the government's rhetoric of a 'second Vendée,' appearing in this narrative to be an all-powerful entity of sedition capable of spreading across France. The word 'Vendée' simply became an adjective describing anything perceived as a threat to the nation.

Attacks on priests in the press were relentless, particularly in the reports from the Commune de Paris, led by the fervent anti-clerical Jacques-René Hébert. On 8 June 1793, for example, the *Moniteur* has the Commune accusing priests of spreading counterrevolutionary ideas in Catholic strongholds of the city. The report warned the reader that Catholic "processions are favored by counterrevolutionaries. These refractory priests have taken a liking to inciting trouble in the sections; they want to make a second Vendée out of Paris." Fortunately, "the people are becoming enlightened, they understand that having bread is more important than going to mass… of course they need a Sunday to rest, but there's no need to sully it with superstition." The Commune's report also denounced priests for their vow of celibacy. "We will celebrate marriage and mothers, especially those who raise their children well. We will have civic festivals… and the people will be our God, there is no need for any other."[34] The association of the Vendée with priests, who the Hébertists hated because they did not have children to grow into the next generation of citizens, cannot have been good for the Vendée's image among the soldiers sent to fight there. Furthermore, rhetoric about priests being agents of Vendean sedition only served to reinforce the mythical idea of the Vendée as a homogenous land of counterrevolutionary Catholics who posed an existential threat to the Republic.

[33] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 27 November 1793.
[34] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 8 June 1793.

These attacks also highlighted priests' role in Vendean terror, attempting to portray the fanatical rebels as violent savages. The 'Anecdotes' section of the *Moniteur* on 5 January 1794 recounts a disturbing story involving a refractory priest and former deputy in the National Assembly named Robin. "Every Saturday evening, this abhorrent monster says a midnight mass." His masses are typically "followed by atrocious exhortations in which he excites all the frenzied rebels slit the throats of and burn at the stake everyone in their immediate surroundings." The ceremonies "do not end until these monsters slit the throats of twenty-five or sometimes even fifty prisoners in their captivity."[35]

So afraid was the government of the influence of priests that the *Moniteur* sometimes prints pragmatic measures that they advocated to maintain their loyalty to the Revolution. The edition of 24 November 1793, for example, included a speech from Danton in which he argued that "we must have good sense in our politics: understand that if you cut off the priests' sustenance, the only alternatives you leave them are starvation, or joining up with the rebels in the Vendée."[36] The front page on 27 January 1794 even displayed a statement from Hébert, no friend of the church, arguing a similar point. He asserted that "If you eliminate the priests' livelihood, you will force them to create a new Vendée." Hébert proposed instead that the government heavily survey the priests, suggesting in characteristic fashion that "the council should make this the order of the day until there are no more priests, but only citizens."[37]

After series of crushing republican victories over the Royal Catholic Army from October-December 1793, the coverage in the *Moniteur* turned into a victory lap. While the paper continued many of the trends discussed above, the period from December 1793 to the early

[35] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 5 January 1794.
[36] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 24 November 1793.
[37] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 27 January 1794.

months of 1794 is most notable for its celebration of the Vendean defeats. The decision of the country's leading newspaper to print the correspondence of Jean-Baptist Carrier is particularly striking because of his frank tone. Carrier, infamous for his conduct as a representative on mission to Nantes, withheld nothing in his reports to the Convention. In one letter that appears in the 12 December 1793 issue, Carrier reported with glee that republican forces were making progress against the rebel army of François de Charette. He wrote that "these types of engagements do not cost even ten lives for the Republic, who can claim to have the most patient, tireless and brave soldiers, nothing phases them." The rebels were not so lucky. "The remnants of Charette's army are in wholesale disarray; I hope soon to inform you of their of their total and definitive extermination."[38] Just three days later, the *Moniteur* printed another letter from Carrier in which he poked fun at drowning priests. After recording that republican forces had won their eighth victory against Charette's army on the left bank of the Loire River, he remarks that "fifty-eight individuals, [prisoners] who I'm told were refractory priests, arrived in Nantes from Angers." Immediately, the captured priests "were locked in a boat and sent out onto the Loire; last night they sank and were swallowed up by the river. What revolutionary fervor the Loire demonstrates!"[39] Most disturbingly however, the front page on 28 December featured perhaps Carrier's most famous letter. Writing after the republican victory at the Battle of le Mans on 13 December 1793, Carrier recounted that "the defeat of the brigands is so complete that our men are killing, rounding them up and bringing them to Nantes by the hundreds." Consequently, "the guillotine alone will not suffice, so I have taken it upon myself to begin having them shot… I

[38] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 12 December 1793.
[39] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 15 December 1793.

invite my colleague Francastel to employ this clean and expeditious method. In the name of humanity, I purge these monsters from the free world." [40]

The press coverage became only more euphoric from there. The issue from the very next day included a 'patriotic hymn' whose opening stanza reads:

> They have finally chased far from that impious village
>
> These cruel slaves of tyrants who are crueler still
>
> The invincible genius of our liberty
>
> Drove out these vile brigands.[41]

Such reverence for the military and state seems here to have taken on an almost religious dimension. An interesting report printed on 9 February 1794 portrays the War in the Vendée as a uniquely important point in history. The report, read aloud in the Convention, argued that "The War of the Vendée holds an important place in the history of the French Revolution." Why was it so important? It has "powerfully served the cause of liberty. It has opened the eyes of good citizens to the dangers surrounding them; it has suddenly elevated French republicans to the energy to today makes enslaved Europe (*l'Europe esclave*) tremble."[42] Printing this kind of rhetoric in the wake of the republican victories cemented the idea that this war was truly an existential struggle of great importance between freedom and slavery. Unfortunately, it is during this period that, despite the defeat of the Vendean army, the worst of the violence would begin.

What has been reviewed here illustrates the degree to which the revolutionary government was obsessed with a mythical image of the Vendée. The press, reporting its daily proceedings, followed suit by documenting this view and reinforcing it through the publication of

[40] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 28 December 1793.
[41] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 29 December 1793.
[42] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 9 February 1794.

supplementary materials that portray the Vendée as a backwards holdover from the Ancien Régime; a veritable landmark of royalist fanaticism and savagery that posed an existential threat to the Revolution. Daily readers of the *Moniteur* who supported the government would feel nationalist pride reading of the great republican triumphs over those who would have France return to the vile servitude of the Ancien Régime. For those who did not support the Terror, reading the news everyday would instill in them fear and numbness to the daily violence. As Bronislaw Baczko remarks:

> The precise function of the Jacobin discourse on the Terror was to justify its purpose by sublimating it through symbolism and impassioned uproar, so as to hide the hideous reality: the rumbling of the carts carrying the condemned; the sharp blows of the guillotine's blade; the dirt, promiscuity, and epidemics in the overcrowded gaols; but also, in everybody, the repression of fears and anxieties which deeply troubled their minds without them being able or daring to express themselves openly, although these fears were kept alive by rumors produced by the daily repression.[43]

This perception of the Vendée as an existential threat to the nation filled with cultural undesirables had horrifying implications for the conduct of the war. After poor leadership and coordination prevented them from winning victory in the early months of the war, on 1 August 1793 the National Convention ratified a decree from the Committee of Public Safety that imposed draconian measures on the Vendée. Article VII proclaimed that "The forests will be cut down, rebel hideouts will be destroyed, their crops will be harvested [for the army] … and their livestock will be seized." Furthermore, Article XIV stated that "The rebels' property now

[43] Bronislaw Baczko, *Ending the Terror: The French Revolution after Robespierre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 137.

belongs to the Republic, and a portion of it will be given to those who declare themselves loyal to the fatherland (*patrie*) to compensate for their losses." It is worth mentioning that Article VIII stipulated that "Women, children, and the elderly will be transported to safe areas, their subsistence and security will be provided for with all due justice to humanity."[44] However, as will be discussed, this provision was extremely difficult to enforce and in certain instances blatantly ignored.

The revolutionary government hoped that these measures would lead to a quick victory over the rebels, but poorly led and supplied republican forces failed to destroy the Royal Catholic Army over the next two months. On 1 October, after Barère's rousing speech in which he called for the Vendée's destruction, the Convention unanimously passed another decree calling for decisive action. This decree stipulated that the armies of the Côtes de Brest and de La Rochelle would unite with one another to form a new fighting force called the Army of the West, vowing to end the war by 20 October. They drafted a proclamation to the new army which declared that "The brigands in the Vendée must be exterminated before the end of the month of October, the health of the fatherland demands it. The impatience of the French people orders it, their courage will accomplish it." Moreover, "national recognition will be lavished upon those whose valor and patriotism irrevocably affirms the freedom of the Republic."[45] Despite the proclamation that the "brigands" would be exterminated, the decree did not define what precisely constituted a "brigand." After the rebel army was defeated and it came time to deliver reprisals, certain representatives on mission and generals employed a very loose definition of the term, killing even women and children.

[44] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 2 August 1793.
[45] *Archives Parlementaires*, Tome LXXV, 426. https://sul-philologic.stanford.edu/philologic/archparl/navigate/76/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/432/

The Army of the West did not win a crushing victory in three weeks as Barère had hoped, but in just two months it thoroughly routed the Royal Catholic Army. After the republican victory at the Second Battle of Cholet on 17 October, the royalists commenced an operation called the *Virée de Galerne*. The next day, the remnants of the Royal Catholic Army along with tens of thousands of noncombatants who feared capture by the republicans began crossing the Loire River and marched north, dragging the theater of war into Brittany and Normandy.[46] Poor coordination prevented republican forces from pursuing the rebels immediately, and they were defeated by the Vendeans under the command of Henri de la Rochejacquelin at the Battle of Laval on 25 October, permitting the rebels to continue their northward march.[47] After unsuccessfully laying siege to the city of Granville on 14 November, the rebels began a fighting retreat to the south. Over the next few weeks, Republican forces under Jean-Baptiste Kléber and François Marceau harassed the Vendeans' operations and inflicted a series of defeats, most notably at the Battle of Le Mans on 13 December. The campaign culminated in the Battle of Savenay on 23 December; the rebel army was destroyed, and most prisoners executed by the republicans. Only a small number of noncombatants who had traveled with the Vendean army were able to avoid capture.[48] The worst of the killing had only begun.

Among the most infamous episodes from the next phase of the war was the so-called 'infernal columns' campaign of Louis Marie Turreau, during which his army rampaged through the Vendée burning down villages and massacring civilians from January-May 1794. As Martin has pointed out, Turreau was hardly satisfied with his assignment. In a letter to the Convention on 22 January 1794, Turreau and representative on mission Pierre Bourbotte expressed their confusion

[46] Martin, *La Vendée*, 169-70.
[47] *Ibid.*, 175-6.
[48] *Ibid.*, 182-4.

at not being recalled after the Vendean defeat at Savenay. They felt that since the rebels were now little more than scattered guerilla bands that they had completed their task. Turreau wrote to the Committee "that the destruction of the brigands necessarily entailed the end of our mission; having five representatives accompany the Army of the West has become excessive." Furthermore, Turreau hoped that "those who for nearly ten months now have performed their sacred duty, exposing themselves to danger and fatigue… would be permitted by the Convention to return home." He complained that "there is a limit, citizen colleagues, to human energy, ours is for the moment exhausted, and still, you judge it suitable to prolong our mission."[49]

The Committee wrote to Turreau on 29 January informing him that he was not yet being recalled to Paris. Although "your first mission is finished… It is essential that you traverse the departments of the Vendée and Deux Sèvres, conducting a close survey of the lands in order to provide a basis for understanding the means of regenerating this unfortunate region."[50] Lazare Carnot put it more bluntly on 6 February, instructing Turreau that the presence of any resistance whatsoever was unacceptable. "Exterminate the brigands to the last man: that is your order; we ask especially that you do not leave one single musket in the departments that have participated in the revolt and might serve the cause in any capacity." He added that "we regard as traitors any generals or all other individuals who even think of resting before the destruction of the rebels is entirely completed."[51] Turreau followed this order as closely as possible but found it difficult to maintain the discipline of his men. During the early months of 1794 his army rode through the Vendée torching the countryside and seeking out the "brigands," but the vagueness of this term made it difficult to know who to kill. To make matters worse, many of Turreau's subordinate

[49] *Reccuil des actes du Comité de salut public, avec la correspondence officielle des représentants en mission et le register du conseil exécutif provisoire,* Vol. 10, 385-6.
[50] *Ibid*., 512.
[51] *Correspondance Générale de Carnot*, (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale), Vol. 4, 285.

commanders often loosely interpreted his orders, commanding their troops to fire on civilians. The most famous example is perhaps the 'massacre des Lucs,' during which, in a state of disorder and chaos, republican troops massacred several hundred civilians who were seeking refuge with François de Charette's rebel band. [52] Turreau's campaign of destruction continued until the Committee of Public Safety finally recalled him to Paris in May 1794. The 'infernal columns' represent perhaps more than any other operation the confused nature of the government's policy in the Vendée. It is clear that the leadership wanted to kill people they viewed as a threat, but it was unclear who the targeted group was. Failure to adequately define the term "brigand" contributed to the needless murder of thousands of innocent civilians.

No one's conduct, however, has received more attention than Jean-Baptiste Carrier. Sent as a representative on mission to Nantes in Fall 1793, Carrier meted out harsh reprisals to captured rebels after their defeat in the *Virée de Galerne* and established a reputation for cruelty as governor of the city. In a letter to the Committee on 29 January 1794, Carrier outlined his approach for the "destruction of fanaticism" in an interesting passage that is worth quoting at length:

> As for fanaticism, it is necessary only to use your crimes efficiently, without attacking freedom of religion; to kill fanaticism it is necessary to destroy it in an indirect manner without giving the impression that you are acting excessively, and then, if you have conducted yourself appropriately, you have the chance to deliver the fatal blow to this terrible plague: the hatred that all the peasants have for constitutional priests. Provided that they are made to understand that they can live

[52] Jean-Clément Martin, "Le cas de Turreau et des colonnes infernales." in *La Vendée et la Révolution*, (Paris: Éditions Perrin, 2007), 101-2.

> without their superstitions, they will give them up without regret. How skillfully I will employ Machiavelli's principle![53]

It seems that Carrier is referencing here the passage from *The Prince* in which Machiavelli argues that a prince who wants to stabilize his kingdom should commit all necessary atrocities at one time so as not to be viewed as a miserly figure for too long. Carrier, however, employed such harsh methods that they would be judged "excessive" by almost any standards other than his own.

When Carrier was brought to trial for war crimes in the Fall of 1794, the National Convention's report on his conduct exposed a laundry list of atrocities. Under Carrier's administration, "All the families of Nantes were oppressed and in mourning, and despite this Carrier reduced the rations to a half-loaf of stale bread per day."[54] The twentieth piece of evidence brought against Carrier recounts an anecdote in which he "ordered the drowning of eighty refractory priests who had been sentenced only to deportation."[55] He had no interest in making peace with the few rebels that remained at large. A letter to the Committee revealed that "A number of rebels who had come to surrender their weapons were shot on the spot." Additionally, Carrier "indistinctly ordered Vendean women, girls, and children who were in the prisons to be drowned." As if that were not enough, he "authorized a military commission to begin killing people in the countryside, many of whom had never taken up arms" against the

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[53] *Reccueil des actes du Comité de Salut Public*, Vol. 10, 521.

[54] *Rapport fait à la Convention Nationale par la Commission des Vignt-Un, pour examiner la conduit du Représentant du peuple Carrier*, 5. https://etatcivil-archives.vendee.fr/arkotheque/visionneuse/visionneuse.php?arko=YTo4OntzOjQ6ImRhdGUiO3M6MTA6IjIwMjItMDYtMjYiO3M6MTA6InR5cGVfZm9uZHMiO3M6MTE6ImFya29fc2VyaWVsIjtzOjQ6InJlZjEiO2k6NDtzOjQ6InJlZjIiO3M6NDoiNjIxNSI7czoxNjoiYm9ybmVfcGFnZV9kZWJ1dCI7aToxO3M6MTQ6ImJvcm5lX3BhZ2VfZmluIjtpOjI1O3M6MTY6InZpc2lvbm5ldXNlX2h0bWwiO2I6MTtzOjIxOiJ2aXNpb25uZXVzZV9odG1sX21vZGUiO3M6NDoicHJvZCI7fQ==

[55] *Ibid*., 26.

Republic.[56] The witnesses from Carrier's trial elucidate his administration's conduct in more detail. One witness claimed he brought a woman to Carrier and his men who "might have been guilty, I wasn't sure; she was shot dead immediately." This woman had two children, and upon inquiring about their fate, Carrier's men told simply instructed him to "let them perish."[57] Another witness described Carrier as tirelessly working to enforce his harsh measures. "Carrier spoke of nothing but firing squads and the guillotine, he appeared to think himself the arbiter of life and death." In the surrounding areas of Nantes near the Loire River, the witness claimed further that "Pregnant women, elderly people, and children were all drowned. We counted more than six hundred children who had been thrown into the river."[58] While they are almost certainly somewhat hyperbolic, such testimonies help illuminate the horror of Carrier's administration. Despite the defeat of the rebels in the *Virée de Galerne*, he was persistently obsessed with such abstractions as "fanaticism" and "brigandry," refusing to accept the reality that the military threat had passed. Carrier viewed these as threats to the French nation that needed to be eliminated, and from late 1793 to March 1794 he inflicted horrible suffering upon the civilian population and rebels seeking amnesty for which there was no military justification.

It should be noted however, that the republican army was not killing everyone. Surprisingly little has been written about the policies towards Vendean refugees, but their experience illustrates that the Republic made a genuine effort to evacuate some civilians from the theater of war. As will be discussed, the government's refuge policy also complicates the notion that the massacres in the Vendée constitute a genocide. In *Les réfugiés des guerres de Vendée*, Guy-Marie Lenne outlines the official policy and documents some aspects of refugee life. Major cities

[56] *Ibid., 30.*
[57] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 2 October 1794.
[58] *Le Moniteur Universel*, 26 October 1794.

in western France began accepting refugees in March 1793, most of whom were republicans fleeing from royalist terror in the early months of the war. Nantes, for example, decreed in May that they would give "20 sous per day 'to citizens from the countryside seeking refuge in Nantes.'"[59]. Even when the republicans began destroying the region after the 1 August 1793 decree, they continued to save civilians. During Turreau's 'infernal columns' campaign of 1794, his army rounded up many civilians who survived republican fires and massacres, escorting them to designated refugee zones outside the theater of war. Admittedly, however, Turreau's men were extremely selective in who they chose to save, often shooting everyone but those they perceived to be ardent patriots.[60] Upon their arrival in the refugee zones, the government did what it could to house those who fled. In Nantes and Angers, the state requisitioned old church lands and property of the émigrés, converting them into public housing for the refugees. In some areas, refugees also received public funds to help them financially in their new home, though the war effort meant excess funds and supplies were limited.[61] Many of the men who escaped decided to serve in the republican army, becoming integrated into the national guard of the local municipalities to which they had fled. Since they knew the local landscape well, the army also employed male refugees as guides who helped with reconnaissance.[62]

Unfortunately, the local authorities often viewed refugees with extreme suspicion, subjecting them to heavy surveillance. For example, Nantes forced many refugees from March 1793 to wear a red shoulder patch signifying that they had arrived there from the Vendée.[63] Moreover, not all the representatives on mission (the most notable offender was Carrier) honestly adhered to the

[59] Guy-Marie Lenne, *Les réfugiés des guerres de Vendée*, (La Crèche: Geste Éditions, 2003), 222.
[60] *Ibid.*,33-4.
[61] *Ibid.*, 207-7.
[62] *Ibid.*, 238-9.
[63] *Ibid.*,205.

policy of saving women and children per Barère's 1 October 1793 decree. There also persisted the perennial problem of knowing who did and did not need to be evacuated. We have already discussed Turreau's trouble deciding what constituted a "brigand" but the representatives on mission were just as responsible for the excessive killing as the army. As Michel Biard illustrates in *Missionaires de la République*, the representatives on mission often spread inflammatory rhetoric about the need to evacuate "good citizens" immediately so that everyone remaining could be killed at once.[64] It is plausible to suggest that the army sometimes received erroneous reports that these citizens had already been evacuated, leading them to obey their orders to destroy villages and massacre the remaining civilians. Despite its mixed success, the policy of evacuating refugees to safe zones demonstrates that the Republic did not aim to exterminate the entire Vendean population. They not only saved people who they viewed as good patriots but allocated public funds to help them safely relocate and, in the case of the men, integrated them into the army and benefited from their expertise in the local geography. Tragically, reckless irresponsibility in the civilian and military leadership kept Barère's policy of saving noncombatants from working as it should have. Furthermore, hyper-nationalist rhetoric about "exterminating brigands" and destroying the Vendée meant excessive killing was probably inevitable.

Difficulties surrounding the management of the violence stemmed partially from the Committee's inability to gain total control of the war effort. Although it was an extremely powerful executive, the Committee was unable to wrestle control of the War ministry from the Parisian municipal government, dominated by extremists who controlled the mobs, until April 1794. As Howard Brown illustrates in *War, Revolution, and the Bureaucratic State*, Parisian

[64] Michel Biard, *Missionaries de la République: Les représentants du people en mission* (Paris: CTHS Histoire, 2002), 322.

radicals often had a strong influence on military policy. He argues that "from April 1793 to its demise in April 1794, the Ministry was directed by Parisian radicals who exploited their influence in the sansculotte movement… to obstruct the concentration of executive power in the Committee." This granted "War ministry bureaucrats great latitude in their exercise of power despite persistent efforts of the Convention to take control."[65] The extremists, led by Jacques-René Hébert, successfully resisted a power grab by the Convention in the Summer of 1793, cancelling the election of the Committee's candidate of choice for War Minister and ensuring instead that their ally Jean-Baptiste-Noël Bouchotte retained his position.[66] Under Bouchotte's direction, the War Ministry granted military appointments motivated by politics and promoted the radical dechristianization efforts that were so unpopular outside of Paris. The Convention passed the law of 14 Frimaire in December 1793 with the hope of disempowering these extremists and centralizing all power to the Committee. However, despite the law's eventual success in ending the worst of the violence and dechristianization, the Committee did not gain control of the War Ministry until after the Convention voted to execute Hébert in March 1794, at which point radical terrorists like Carrier began to be recalled to Paris. The Hébertists' thus share a burden of responsibility for the crimes in the Vendée. Despite the Committee's attempt at times to moderate the conflict, these extremists pursued unpopular and counterproductive policies that not only hindered the success of the refugee policy but also incentivized Vendean citizens to join the rebels out of fear of massacre or resentment for the violation of their religious freedom. The fragmented nature of the war effort further complicates the notion that there was a unified policy of genocide directed from Paris. Although they agreed that excessive force was necessary, the

[65] Howard G. Brown, *War, Revolution, and the Bureaucratic State: Politics and Army Administration in France, 1791-1799* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 65-6.
[66] *Ibid*., 74-5.

Committee and War Ministry had radically different ideas about how to manage violence towards the civilian population and especially towards priests, who the Hébertists loathed.

Whatever the Jacobins' plans for the Vendée were, the coup of 9 Thermidor year II (27 July 1794) abruptly ended them. The coup ousted Robespierre and his allies from power and commenced a new phase of the Revolution in which the ethos of the French nation changed yet again. Bronislaw Baczko documents these new political developments with erudition in *Ending the Terror.* With the same disturbing unanimity that was itself a product of the Terror, everyone now turned against it. "No one defended Robespierre… all the popular societies, all the constituted authorities, all the armies, in a word, all of France awoke on 10 Thermidor anti-Robespierrist, even 'Thermidorian.'" Furthermore, the ethos of the fatherland (*patrie*) no longer rested in using terror against France's internal enemies but rather in the protection of the nation from the return of Robespierre's supposed tyranny.[67] For Baczko, this is most evident in the trial of Jean-Baptiste Carrier in Autumn 1794. He argues that "to prosecute him came down to putting on trial *the very principles of the Terror* and their application in the war of the Vendée." Carrier defended himself by outright denying crimes in some cases and shifting blame to his subordinates in others, arguing that "all he had done, in the end, was to apply the policy set out by the Convention." Moreover, Baczko points out that Carrier had for several months after the end of the Terror remained active in the Convention as a representative of the people, "which, by [legal] definition carried the requirements of probity, virtue, and patriotism" and afforded him certain legal protections.[68] In his own ghastly way, Carrier was correct. The very men who now stood before him as prosecutors had only one year earlier sycophantically cheered on the Terror along with him, passing the measures he was now being prosecuted for implementing. However,

[67] Baczko, *Ending the Terror*, 36-9.
[68] *Ibid*.,164-6.

the Terror was over. The jury sentenced Carrier to death and the Convention eventually closed the Jacobin Club, prompting one newspaper to write that "'They shall no longer drown us, they shall no longer shoot us, *they shall no longer turn their guns on the French people in order to make it better.*'"[69]

Unsurprisingly, these sweeping political developments brought about a radical shift in the conduct of the war in the Vendée. After the recall of terrorists like Carrier and Turreau to Paris in March and May of 1794, the rebels began rebuilding their army under the leadership of François de Charette and renewed their attack in the late summer. Their new army was more professionalized than the last, recruiting new men by force and instituting formal military hierarchy in the chain of command.[70] However, Charette's forces remained heavily outnumbered and out led, especially after the Republic appointed General Lazare Hoche as supreme commander of republican forces in the military Vendée in November. Hoche's appointment is very significant. He was selected because over the course of the summer forces under his command achieved great success using radically different methods of pacification than previous generals in the Vendée. In an order issued on 30 September 1794, Hoche offered a scathing critique of his predecessors' conduct. He insisted that "for too long we have believed that, to destroy the brigands fermenting unrest in Brittany and the Vendée, sending men alone was enough." Hoche felt that "the system we have continually followed whereby we fight poorly armed and disciplined men with heavily armed men of the same sort is abusive and infinitely dangerous." The solution was to respect the inhabitants' property and freedom of worship to disincentivize them from joining the revolt. "Austere discipline, probity, all the republican

[69] *Ibid*., 184.
[70] Martin, *La Vendée*, 205-3.

virtues must be vigorously enforced. Combine firmness and clemency… and protect the inhabitants from all military vexations, scrupulously respect their property."[71]

Utilizing this system as commander in the west helped Hoche to limit the excessive violence that alienated the civilian population and soundly defeat Charette's army over the next several months. Looting remained a pervasive problem under Hoche's administration, but this type of looting was probably due to supply shortages, a perennial feature of eighteenth-century warfare. The war finally appeared to be over upon the signing of the Treaty of La Jaunaye on 17 February 1795. This uneasy peace exempted the citizens of the Vendée from military conscription and taxation for six years, firmly reestablished freedom of worship, and allowed the rebels to maintain their standing army as a local militia in exchange for their official recognition of the Republic's legitimacy. [72] It was not to last.

Upon news of the young Louis XVII's death in June 1795, Charette, despite advice from his officers that the cause was hopeless, decided to renew hostilities against the Republic. Charette had been in contact with British Prime Minister William Pitt, who promised him that the British would send arms and financial aid to the rebels. He also informed Charette that the British were to send an expeditionary force to invade the Vendée. The Republic sent Hoche back to the Army of the West, and at Quiberon on 21 July, he defeated a 15,000 strong royalist force meant to protect the British landing, preventing the rebels from receiving these reinforcements. In September, an Anglo-French force led by the Count d'Artois attempted to land in France via the Île d'Yeu, but they too were repulsed by republican forces. On 12 October, Charette, expecting another attempted British landing, was informed that they would not be arriving. The British supplied the rebels with another shipment of weapons but told Charette that he could expect no

[71] *Hoche, sa vie, sa correspondence*, (Paris: Baudoin, 1892), 76-77.
[72] Martin, *La Vendée*, 269-70.

further direct military interventions. On 18 November, the Comte d'Artois abandoned his forces on the Île d'Yeu and returned to exile in England. Hoche spent the next few months destroying Charette's remaining rebel bands and hunting him down. He established a de facto military dictatorship in the Vendée, once again instructing his men that violence and disrespect towards the local population would be severely punished. This method prevented the locals from being driven into the hands of the rebels. Despite some continued looting, Hoche successfully managed to establish relative order, allowing him to concentrate on defeating the royalists militarily.[73] After months of chasing the scattered rebel bands around the military Vendée, Hoche's forces finally captured Charette on 23 March 1796. They transported him to Nantes, and he was executed by firing squad on the 29th.[74] The conflict between the Republic and Vendée had finally reached its end.[75] Hoche accomplished what seemed impossible to the political leadership during the Terror: he pacified the Vendée without using excessive force against the civilian population. He did not burn down villages, he did not drown any women or children and he did not order mass executions of civilians by firing squad. He simply defeated the royalist armies militarily and executed their ringleader to break their morale while respecting the local population's liberty and security. The political developments after the Thermidorian Reaction thus profoundly affected the conduct of this war. After Hoche's victory, the Republic made peace with the Vendée instead of massacring the population. It was no longer interested in using terror to subdue France's internal enemies. The leadership simply did what was necessary to end

[73] *Ibid*., 272-9.
[74] *Ibid*., 283.
[75] Although this ended the conflict between the Vendée and the revolutionary government, there was another brief uprising upon Napoleon's seizure of power in 1799. He offered amnesty to all who would accept it and brutally suppressed those who would not.

the revolt and maintain the sovereignty of the French state without the desire to enforce ideological homogeneity among the population.

It bears mentioning that the problem of atrocity and managing violence towards civilian populations was a novelty to eighteenth-century European warfare, which typically did not involve substantial violence against civilians. At the end of the century however, a new type of popular, ideological warfare emerged from another nationalist experiment across the Atlantic. As Holger Hoock demonstrates in *Scars of Independence*, the British had their own set of difficulties managing violence and terror in their efforts to suppress the American Revolution. Their problems resemble those that Revolutionary France faced in the 1790s. While most eighteenth-century wars involved battles only between the standing armies of various nations, the British now faced the unique challenge of fighting against the American Patriot army, who had begun carrying out atrocities against Loyalist civilians and administrators. The Loyalists, as British subjects, were entitled to protection from the British government. However, this meant that the British had to form a coherent counterinsurgency policy that would allow them to crush the Patriots without driving potential Loyalists and neutrals to join the Patriot cause. They had to reassess the co-called 'codes of war,' which "distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate methods of waging war, proscribing excessive violence, or cruelty, against enemy combatants, captives, and civilians." Additionally, they faced the challenge of distinguishing between "American" traitors to whom the laws of war did not apply and Loyalists who still merited the humane treatment due to all subjects of the British Empire.[76] These ambiguities unfortunately resulted in a long and brutal war, with atrocities on all sides. The British were never able to fully commit either to a humane or hardline approach to defeating the rebels. Although Whigs like

[76] Holger Hoock, *Scars of Independence: America's Violent Birth*, (New York: Crown, 2017), 62-3.

Edmund Burke advised less harsh treatment towards the Americans, arguing that excessive cruelty would fuel anti-British hatred, the Tory Secretary of State Lord George Germain insisted that only brutal and repressive methods could pacify the rebellious colonies. He was particularly infuriated after the Americans signed a peace treaty with France, arguing in the House of commons that they no longer deserved to be treated as British subjects but as vile traitors who had defected to Britain's perennial enemy. As Hoock points out, Germain's denunciation meant that "Previously redeemable rebels had now been lost irrevocably to the greater British family."[77] This kind of rhetoric at times led to an increase in British terror, which the colonists exploited in the press to portray themselves are morally superior and recruit the population to the Patriot cause.

The French revolutionaries faced even greater problems. They, like the Americans, were a revolutionary government employing terror to enforce the revolutionary program. However, like the British, they were also a sovereign state attempting suppress a popular uprising and faced the additional challenge of a great-power war against all Europe. The decision of the Vendeans to ally themselves with Britain, who provided them with weapons, provoked a furious reaction from the government in Paris akin to London's response to the 1778 Franco-American alliance. As we have seen, from 1793-94, the revolutionary government firmly committed itself to a hardline counterinsurgency policy, vowing to physically destroy the Vendée through brutal scorched earth tactics. Old nationalist animosities in both cases guided the military policies. That the Vendeans formed an alliance with the hated British was unacceptable to the terror regime and no doubt contributed to the unique vitriol the Vendée faced in revolutionary discourse, serving as a justification for violating traditional laws of war. However, the hardline policy contained the

[77] *Ibid.,* 270.

same flaw in the Vendée as it did in America: extreme force and dehumanizing rhetoric failed to scare the population into submission. When the French government began down people's homes and massacring civilians after the rebel army had already been defeated, what reason did the local population have to submit to the Republic? The inability to manage the violence meant that anyone was a potential target and could be killed. Although the Convention deserves credit for the policy of evacuating refugees, several logistical and, as we have seen, political factors prevented it from working properly. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the royalists took to the press to denounce republican atrocities in their *Bulletin of the Friends of the Monarchy and Religion* in much the same way as the American colonists, forcing the government to conduct their own P.R. campaign in the *Moniteur*. Nationalist animosity in both cases triumphed over sound political and military logic. Fortunately for the French, they were able to switch to a more humane and reasonable policy of pacification after Thermidor and Hoche's strategy finally won the war for the Republic.

This war has incited strong reactions since the 1790s, resulting in a very partisan historiography. Historians of the so-called "white" tradition usually view the Vendée as a symbol of Catholic martyrdom and the rebels as romantic heroes who fought a worthy struggle against evil republicans trying to destroy their culture. Their works are typically very critical of the government, and especially Robespierre, for his seemingly boundless commitment to his political program, whatever the human cost. "Blues" of the nineteenth century often defended the massacres as necessary to destroy the revolt and defend the Revolution, suggesting that the counterrevolution was an aristocratic plot rather than a genuine popular movement. More recent works in this tradition recognize the horror of the massacres and the popular nature of the uprising but maintain that the killings resulted more from misunderstandings about the military

reality than from a master plan to destroy the local culture of the Vendée. They also often deny that a unified "Vendean" culture existed, highlighting the heterogeneity of the region's politics before 1793.

Ironically, among the more passionate early advocates of the "white" position was no monarchist but rather the radical leftist Gracchus Babeuf, famous for his participation in the 1796 Conspiracy of the Equals that attempted to overthrow the Directory government. In 1795, Babeuf published an often-neglected book entitled *Du Système de Dépopulation* in which he fervently denounced the Terror regime's conduct in the Vendée. Babeuf claims to have discovered a secret plot whereby the government would exterminate the population of the Vendée to compensate for food shortages. He outlines this "plan for total destruction" in a fascinating passage that is worth quoting at length:

> It is time to lift the veil that has hitherto impaired the discovery of the fact that there was an insurrection in the Vendée only because this vile government wanted one, and incorporated it into its treacherous plan, which sought to purge the nation of all its diversity, massacring an entire region which, with its productive beauty and goodness would provide vast resources for the establishment of the first new agrarian colonies.[78]

Babeuf thus seems to suggest that the government's plan was not only to suppress the uprising, but to eliminate the local population so that "good citizens" could benefit from the food produced there. He supports his claim by citing several letters from high officials in the government in which they express their concern over the difficulty of feeding the population and the wasted potential of fertile farmlands in the Vendée that were being destroyed by the long

[78] Gracchus Babeuf, *La guerre de la Vendée et le système de dépopulation* (Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 2008), 129.

war. His assertion about depopulation rests on his interpretation of the 1 October 1793 decree on exterminating brigands. He insists that "This code is very clear. Exterminate all the inhabitants of a region and burn down their homes as a way to end the war."[79]

Babeuf's book remained in relative obscurity for two centuries until Reynald Secher resurrected it upon the publication of his controversial 1986 book *Le Génocide Franco-Français*. Secher shares Babeuf's interpretation of the 1 October decree and argues that the massacres in the Vendée constitute the first modern genocide. He cites the Revolution's extreme anti-clericalism during the Terror as evidence that they wanted to systematically eradicate the Vendée's royalist Catholic culture, which Secher considers to be strongly rooted in the region's history. Secher believes the rebels embodied the true spirit of 1793, pointing out that the revised *Déclaration* from that year technically guaranteed the population's right to insurrection in the face of oppressive government. Thus, he suggests that "this war was above all else a crusade for individual liberty, personal security, personal property."[80] Furthermore, he insists that the reprisals meted out to the rebels in late 1793-94 "do not represent dreadful but inevitable acts that occur in the relentlessness of combat during a long and atrocious war." Secher maintains that, far from an inevitability or necessity, these were "premeditated, organized, planned, cold-blooded, massive and systematic massacres committed with the conscious and proclaimed intent to destroy a targeted (*délimitée*) region, and exterminate an entire people, particularly women and children, in order to eliminate an 'impure race' judged ideologically irredeemable."[81]

Jean-Clément Martin denies both that the Vendée possessed a discernible regional identity prior to the war and that the massacres constitute a genocide. Pointing to the political heterogeneity of

[79] *Ibid*., 171.
[80] Reynald Secher, *Le Génocide-Franco-Français: La Vendée-Vengé* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986),296.
[81] *Ibid*., 298.

the region, he argues that the so-called "Vendean" identity described by scholars like Secher is not rooted in history but is instead a product of the "foundational defeat" during the *Virée de Galerne*. Martin suggests that this defeat led to the romanticization of the revolt by contemporaries and nineteenth century historians, who constructed an image of the Vendée as a "symbol of moral and religious resistance to the forces of revolution and modernity." Moreover, this view of the Vendée "affirms in each time period the importance of its message, embodying opposition to the Republic at the end of the nineteenth century, until the end of the twentieth century, when it became identified as… a region martyred by totalitarianism."[82] He thinks this view, in addition to being mythological, is counterproductive because it causes historians to frame the conflict as a simply "a battle between Good and Evil."[83] Consequently, Martin insists that use of the term "genocide" for these killings is erroneous because it is impossible to know what constitutes a "Vendean", suggesting that "without ideological intentionality applied to a clearly defined targeted group, the notion of genocide has no meaning." He adds further that "the revolutionaries had no ideological body organized around an ideology of exclusion, nor a material and systematic organization, nor planned killings."[84] Martin points, for example, to the 'Massacre des Lucs' during Turreau's infernal columns and the chaotic and undisciplined nature of the massacres, maintaining because of the disorder that "it is impossible to think that the republican soldiers committed in one day a systematic massacre concerning several hundred people."[85] He thus views the killings in the Vendée not as a masterplan of depopulation or genocide but a product of undisciplined chaos and delusion on the part of the political leadership. As he writes in *La Vendée et la France*, "This

[82] Martin, "Les défaites fondatrices." In *La Révolution*, 158.
[83] *Ibid*., 166.
[84] Martin, "À propos du « génocide vendéen. »" in *La Révolution,* 76.
[85] Martin, "Le cas de Turreau et des colonnes infernales." In *La Révolution* 102.

mythical presentation of the Vendée… permitted the war to be nothing more than an imaginary duel between two metaphysical powers. The military reality was not taken into consideration."[86]

It is difficult to agree with Babeuf that the government "wanted" the war from the beginning. The war commenced in 1793 when Vendean royalists began massacring Vendean republicans and was sparked largely by resistance to military conscription. To suggest that the Republic abandon the policy of conscription simply to appease the Vendée would be unrealistic given France's precarious military situation. Furthermore, given this disastrous situation, why would the Republic deliberately provoke a civil war and worsen its troubles? Babeuf's assertion appears more credible if one considers the period following *Virée de Galerne*, during which the Republic did indeed choose to continue the war after it was no longer necessary militarily. However, the questions of depopulation and genocide raised by Babeuf and Secher are complicated by the government's refugee policy. Their interpretation of the 1 October 1793 decree as a proclamation of intent to exterminate the entire population of the Vendée assumes that the provision of the 1 August decree on saving women and children was then invalidated. As we have discussed however, the republicans continued this refugee policy even during 1794, saving not only some women and children but also incorporating some Vendean men into the republican army. They also diverted public funds to help refugees resettle and requisitioned property to house them. Furthermore, if the Republic intended to exterminate the entire population, why did it recall Carrier and Turreau to Paris in March and May of 1794, precisely the time at which the Committee began to gain *more* control over the war effort? It does not seem likely that a government seeking to commit wholesale genocide would recall two of its most prolific agents of mass murder away from the theater of killing. Finally, although the 1 October decree uses the word "exterminate" in reference to the

[86] Martin, *La Vendée*, 192.

"brigands," it was never clear, even to contemporaries, what exactly a "brigand" was. Certain representatives on mission may have exploited this ambiguity for their personal genocidal ambitions, but it is unclear that there was a national campaign of total extermination directed from Paris.

However, it is equally difficult to agree with Martin that there was not an ideology of exclusion or a systematic element to the killing. The kind of nationalism that the leadership chose to embrace during the Terror was extremely exclusionary. Politicians in Paris repeatedly passed decrees "outlawing" or calling for violence against those that they viewed as a threat to the nation. As Babeuf and Secher demonstrate, the government's decision to advocate and commit this violence was motivated by something they saw as inherent in the identity of the Vendée. Martin is correct in his assertion that this identity is largely a fabrication because the Vendée was not culturally or politically homogeneous. Among those massacred by the army there were certainly many republicans and among those saved there were probably many monarchists. Even if one chooses to accept Secher's argument that "Vendean" identity was synonymous with royalist Catholicism, it is important to remember that the dechristianization efforts were unpopular among most of the national leadership. Danton and Robespierre promoted the law of 14 Frimaire with the expressed purpose of disempowering atheistic representatives on mission who implemented these efforts, which were popular primarily with radical Hébertists like Carrier. However, whether the so-called "Vendean" identity was real or not, it motivated the government to continue murdering people, with even men like Carnot, who was no bloodthirsty extremist, writing to Turreau demanding that he "exterminate the brigands."[87] Moreover, despite the fact that the Convention's efforts to end dechristianization with the 14 Frimaire law took several months to succeed, extremists in the War

[87] *Correspondance Générale de Carnot*, 285.

Ministry continued to advocate the use of violence and terror until their fall from power. Even if one denies, as Martin does, that there was a 'system of terror,' much of the violence was still directed from Paris to the representatives on mission via the Committee and the War Ministry. One cannot blame chaos and poor discipline alone.

The French Revolution introduced Europe to modern nationalism and the nation-state. This ideology provided a means through which the revolutionaries could express, implement, and protect their political program. In 1789, they invoked nationalism to express their desire for statehood and protection from royal despotism. It also helped in this period to foster a culture of solidarity, encouraging the citizens to come together as Frenchman, caring about the rights and well-being of people they did not know and would never meet. However, as Sieyès wrote in 1789, this was contingent on the people living under one common rule of law. In tranquil times, these principles appear harmless and even benign. However, when the circumstances of total war against all Europe set in, more sinister aspects of nationalism began to express themselves. Afraid of losing their statehood and being relegated to the status of "nothing" in which they lived before the Revolution, the leadership became increasingly paranoid and violent. They became obsessed with "aristocratic plots" and "traitors to the nation," insisting that thousands of people needed to be killed if the nation was to survive. They declared a state of exception and waged a campaign of state terror against those deemed incompatible with the new republican democratic culture, reducing their military conflicts to such abstractions as "liberty" and "slavery." Critics of the thesis of circumstances correctly point out that the worst of the killing took place after the circumstances had ameliorated and thus that they did not justify the repression. However, although they cannot justify the repression, they can help explain it. The leadership, as Martin illustrates, genuinely seems to have believed that the threats persisted despite the military reality, believing themselves

locked in an epic duel between republican liberty and classical slavery. So afraid were the Jacobins of losing their state that they began to kill each other, with even passionate revolutionaries like Danton finding themselves at the guillotine accused of conspiring to destroy the Revolution. The real military threat may have passed, but in the minds of Robespierre and his cohort these threats to the nation were very real and justified the continuation of the violence.

When the Vendée erupted into revolt and became synonymous with counterrevolution and draft-dodging, it is unsurprising that the government reacted so furiously. The leadership attempted to establish a new national culture based on democracy, participatory citizenship and service to the state. Anyone who did not conform to this idea of what it meant to be a "French" citizen no longer belonged to the nation and was viewed as an existential threat to French liberty. That the Vendean rebels refused to serve in the military, resurrected symbols from the Ancien Régime and declared their loyalty to the dethroned monarchy and Catholic church instead of the state was simply unacceptable to the new regime. The revolutionary government became obsessed with the Vendée because they viewed the region as synonymous with this seditious culture. It did not conform to the newly established common law that was the order of the day. Their counterrevolutionary symbolism took on such a powerful meaning for the government that they thought it necessary to wage a campaign of state terror against the entire region, calling for its wholesale destruction.

The war in the Vendée from 1793-4 thus served as an extension of this policy of nationalist state terror. It was in every sense a political war between those who refused the new nation and those who were willing to employ brutal methods to enforce its foundation and ideological homogeneity. However, politics meddled too much in military affairs. Clausewitz argues that military leadership should subordinate themselves to the political leadership because "No proposal required for war

can be worked on in ignorance of political factors."[88] However, it seems the inverse can sometimes be true. The political leadership after the *Virée de Galerne* was informed that the rebels were defeated but chose to continue the war anyways. This led to thousands of unnecessary civilian casualties and the burning of the Vendean countryside that cannot but have driven more men into the hands of the rebels, who indeed formed a new army under Charette's command in the Summer of 1794. Such brutal methods favored by politicians like Carrier seem not to have helped the political or military situation but in fact made both worse. They would have done well to listen to the military leadership and seek to end the conflict instead of inflicting more suffering on the population of the Vendée. Hoche's campaigns of 1794-6 demonstrate that more friendly treatment of civilians was both politicly and militarily advantageous. However, from 1793-4 they were committed to the hyper-nationalist program, willfully denying the military reality and killing those they believed a threat to the nation. It thus seems appropriate to describe those killed in the Vendée as victims of excessive nationalist violence. There was no military justification for their killing, it was the result of the government's commitment to their vague program of exterminating "brigands." Despite the indiscipline that Martin highlights, this terror was often directed from Paris and thus should be described as official policy rather than the uncontrollable excesses of an undisciplined army. After Thermidor, the new ethos of nationalism rendered the Republic's conduct much more amicable, as they abandoned the policy of state terror. They were simply interested in maintaining the state's sovereignty through more traditional means and winning a military victory over the rebel army.

The tragedy is that the revolutionaries probably had little choice but to turn to nationalism. If they were to implement their political program, the French nation did in fact need a state.

[88] Clausewitz, *On War*, 608.

Furthermore, anything less than national mobilization for the needs of total war would have been insufficient to save the Republic from destruction, and it was well worth fighting for. These extreme measures, particularly military conscription, perhaps rendered internal conflict inevitable. The suppression of these internal revolts was also unfortunately necessary. Barère was no maniac to assert in March 1793 that the counterrevolution should not be allowed to spread to Britany, as it eventually did. The rebels were a formidable band of armed insurrectionaries backed by a foreign power, much of their leadership had prior military experience, and although substantive discussion of them is beyond the scope of this paper, the rebels committed many atrocities of their own against republicans. However, Barère, along with so many of the Jacobins, attempted unsuccessfully to combine sensible and necessary policies with reckless and irresponsible rhetoric, embracing an exclusionary ideology so extreme that it engendered an immoral and irrational counterinsurgency effort. He simultaneously demanded that all women and children be spared and that the Vendée be destroyed, a hopelessly confused and unrealistic policy. Although they did in fact save many civilians, they killed many as well. It is difficult to approximate the death tolls, but Secher arrives at a figure of 117, 257 Vendeans killed (15% of the population)[89] while Martin finds that between 220,000 and 250,000 (20% of the population) were either killed or displaced from their homes with nothing known of their fates.[90] Both figures include tens of thousands of civilians and represent a devastating loss of life from which it took the region decades to recover.

Politically justified though the republican war effort may have been, their conduct was utterly shameful. They not only massacred civilians long after such killings could be justified on military grounds, but they sometimes did so in maniacal and sadistic ways like drowning. Even those who were fortunate enough to escape the theater of war as refugees were sometimes treated as second-

[89] Secher, *Le Génocide*, 300.
[90] Martin, *La Vendée*, 315.

class citizens in their new homes, subject to constant surveillance and suspicion. The Vendée remains enshrined in the historical memory as the site of the French Revolution's most horrifying violence, although it is worth mentioning that it was far from the only site of brutal reprisals. The Republic employed harsh methods to suppress other uprisings such as those in Toulon and Lyon. However, none of these revolts received the same level of vitriol in the revolutionary discourse and none of them suffered reprisals on the same scale of the Vendée. Hated as the rebels in other areas of France were, they were often discussed as offshoots of the Vendean uprising. There was no talk of a "second Toulon" but there was great fear that Toulon would become a "second Vendée." The army did not raze the entire city of Toulon, but they did try to physically destroy the Vendée, waging a five-month campaign of state terror and destruction after the initial defeat of the rebels. In his 1 October speech, Barère outlined clearly why he thought the Vendée in particular was so dangerous:

> It is there that fanaticism lives and that the priests have erected its altars; it is there that the émigrés, the blue and red chords and the crosses of Saint-Louis, in contact with the coalition powers, have risen and reassembled the debris of a conspiratorial throne; it is in the Vendée that the aristocrats correspond with the federalists, the départmentaires, the sectionnaires; it is to the Vendée that the guilty wishes of Marseille, the shameful corruption of Toulon, the rebel cries of the Lyonnais, the unrest in the Ardèche, the troubles in the Lozère, the conspiracies in the Eure and Calvados, the vain hopes of Sarthe and Mayenne, the wicked spirit of Angers, and the agitations in Britany all report.[91]

[91] Bertrand Barère, 1 October 1793, National Convention, Paris, France. https://sul-philologic.stanford.edu/philologic/archparl/navigate/76/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/431/

In the eyes of the government, the Vendée's mere existence as a physical and political entity was incompatible with the survival of France. Barère suggested here that if they did not make an example of the Vendée, physically destroying it, the region would always serve as a rallying point for other revolts, insisting that all other counterrevolutionaries "report" to it as their leading inspiration. The destruction of the Vendée, that epitome of all that was contrary to republican virtue and popular democracy, was, to Barère, an integral step in defeating not just the Vendean rebels but all of France's enemies whom the Vendée inspired through its continued existence. Whether one views the massacres as a genocide or an exercise in state terror, it seems that the driving force behind the killing was the government's nationalist obsession with this symbolic region. When wars are reduced to abstractions like "liberty" and "slavery" or any other deontological binary, there is little limit to what the side who believes themselves to represent "liberty" will do to ensure victory over the perceived existential threat.

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