

TOWARD AN ECOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE VENDÉE:

OLD MYTHS AND NEW PARADIGMS

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This work explores the motivations of the two major parties in the civil war in the Vendée from 1793 to 1796. It suggests that traditional understandings overemphasize simplistic notions of the idealistic crusade; the Revolutionaries fought for Republican ideals, while the locals fought to defend traditional Catholicism. This thesis suggests that the major motive for both sides was a fight for survival that was framed and expressed in political and religious terms rather than motivated by them. The reason that these motives have been confused is a long misunderstood connection between the means of discourse, the structure of social values, and their connection to any individual's perceived sense of safety, which suggests an ecological, or holistic, rather than a Manichaeian framework.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Between March 1793 and July 1796, areas of four departments in western France were in a state of revolt against the Revolutionary government. Occurring in immediate response to conscription, the riots soon overtook revolutionary authorities and inaugurated a brutal civil war that remains as a scar of the Revolution. In the midst of the Terror, this brutal conflict stands apart as one of the bloodiest and damaging episodes of the Revolution.

If the conflict in the Vendée is poorly discussed in Anglophone literature, it has been hotly debated in French circles since the conflict began in 1793. Nevertheless, despite the voluminous literature, even the major French histories of the Revolution rarely feature more than a few lines on the Vendée. In truth, the historiography has remained a regional issue, fought almost in isolation between local Republican and Royalist partisans. This national and international silence in the face of such a powerful and violent episode is difficult to explain. It may well reflect a hesitance to address one of the worst aspects of the Terror, which Jean-Clément Martin has marked as the “the execrable part of the Revolution.”¹ It might also reflect a general disinterest in events occurring outside of Paris, a common prejudice that overshadows the periphery.

Whatever the case may be, the literature on the Vendée has, for many years, been left to locals who have consistently portrayed themselves and their opponents in terms verging on caricatures. Recent scholarship has begun to change this dynamic, but groups such as *Souvenir Vendéen* remain stalwart defenders of old orthodoxies.² As with any stereotype, truth does exist in some form. Thus, the Vendée is portrayed as a clash of two faiths: Catholicism and

¹ Jean-Clément Martin, *La Terreur: Part Maudite de la Revolution* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2010).

² The group can be found at <http://www.souvenirvendeen.org/>. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the group is based out of Cholet, the cultural heart of the uprising.

Republicanism. This is essentially a reductionist argument that forces all other factors into itself as supporting evidence, but not as legitimate forces in their own right. As such, the war remains a great Manichaeian battle.

This thesis does not present a new dichotomy. Rather, it refocuses the research in two ways. First, it discusses the War in the Vendée as a stark fight for survival in the midst of a cataclysmic conflict. Both sides felt that their safety was in desperate danger, and so their intense fighting can be framed as reflexive defensive actions rather than ideological crusades. Second, it uses an ecological approach as its investigatory method. Each opposing party exhibited a complex web of relationships within themselves that helps explain their behavior. Moreover, while previous interpretations have overwhelmingly focused on ideology, this study focuses on the dialectic between ideology and practical considerations. This approach is more complicated, but it demonstrates the real nuance of the symbolism, ideas and institutions that the Republicans and the rebels used to frame their discourse and organize their movements.

The Vendéens responded with rebellion only after multiple shocks to their regional socio-political ecology. Each successive shock took a slightly different form but contributed to the accumulation of threats to a greater socio-political ecology. At its core, this ecology was based on the subsistence ethic. The subsistence ethic values safety above all else, and engenders a natural fear of change. Therefore, in explaining the final rising in March of 1793, this thesis suggests that only the fear of a *comprehensive* threat to a worldview and ecological system, resulting from *long-term* antagonisms can explain the uprising.

The same ecological approach applies to the Republican response as well. It is universally agreed that the Revolutionary governments misunderstood the reasons for the unrest in the Vendée and proceeded to handle the uprising violently and indifferently until late 1794

and 1795. Comprehending the Republican response also requires a complex appreciation of its systems and priorities. The earliest Revolutionary government really was one of tolerance and subtlety. The debates between 1789 and 1791 reflect a certain flexibility and lenience toward opposition, although that corroded over time. During the Terror, when the Vendée occurred, this system collapsed under the pressure of war and became a narrow orthodoxy that barely masked a desperate attempt to identify and destroy potential threats to the government's survival.

Just as rebellion was unrepresentative of normal Vendéen behavior, so too such radical repression was unrepresentative of Revolutionary behavior. The Terror marked only two years of ten years of Revolution. If one allows that the leaders of the Revolution prior to and during the conflict were using untested ideas in troubled waters, and were doing so with a set of priorities held only by a small minority of the French population, then it is easier to understand their desperate recourse to obdurate violence.

A complete review of the subject is impossible in a work this size, so the thesis limits itself to five key points. Chapter 1 establishes that the current literature has ossified into one of ideological discourse with only a few exceptions. This is central to any progress in the field. We very often fail to recognize the assumptions that we use to govern our lives, let alone our scholarship. The purpose of a historiography chapter is to expose beliefs and subject them to re-evaluation. Time has yielded an excellent narrative literature on the Vendée, but analysis has remained superficial and, in line with a common human tendency, has simplified and then oversimplified, generalized and over generalized the nature of human behavior.

Chapter 2 provides a short narrative, dedicated primarily to the period prior to the conflict. The important question is the road to war. This period is when the real motives and frustrations of the various parties are clearest. Most pre-war narratives focus on the forces of

escalation, and rightly so. One must have escalation to have a war. Nevertheless, it took almost three years for the war to finally commence. Within that time, the constructive and peaceful systems of both the Republicans and the future rebels deteriorated substantially. The destruction of moderate influences and compromise - in fact of any discourse at all - is crucial to understanding the viciousness of the later conflict. The latter part of the narrative provides a general overview of the war to demonstrate the confused, frustrating and violent nature of the conflict, and is meant also to frame Chapter 4 concerning Turreau's Columns.

Chapter 3 addresses the position of the Catholic Church and faith in Vendéen society and the uprising itself. The Church was a centerpiece of Vendéen society, but not simply the foundation of a moralistic religious worldview that people subscribed to because they were fundamentally good people. Rather, it was a major part of an "enchanted" worldview, one that explained the world in terms of divine influences and held the Church as a singularly potent tool for living. Therefore, attacks on the Church were also attacks on the stability of the metaphysical world of the peasant. These attacks, however, were also only *part* of the reason that the Vendéens ultimately rebelled. When they finally did take up arms, they incorporated substantial amounts of religious overtones and symbolism to give coherence and strength to their fight. This is radically different than fighting specifically and primarily for their faith.

The Revolutionary position on religion has also been oversimplified. It was not a matter of spiritual preference, but fundamentally a question of state power. Although the revolutionaries had little direct interest in officially questioning Christianity, they were willing to attack the Church in an attempt to assert greater sovereignty. Thus, while revolutionaries did attack religious "superstitions" regularly, the attacks fail to explain the vehemence with which the state pursued the reform and reduction of the Catholic Church. Rather; it was the identification of the

Church as an external corporation and eventually as a counter-revolutionary organ that concerned the national and regional governments.

Chapter 4 addresses the march of General Louis Marie Turreau's "Infernal Columns" in early 1794. Historical advocates for an exterminationist or genocidal interpretation of the Vendée flock to these events to prove their case. However, the march of these columns occurred in a confused state of affairs, and is itself often confused with other events that were in the same region but unrelated.³ A careful review of the available evidence certainly does not exonerate the Republican government, but it does render unlikely the idea of an intentionally genocidal policy. In both cases, the motive of practical considerations appears to dominate. The columns were more the failed ploy of a broken system than a deliberate act of clear intention.

Chapter 5 will address the idea of genocide. Anachronism is of no concern. Languages change their means of representing ideas routinely, and teleology is a far greater threat than anachronism. To argue for or against the idea that it was a genocide is fruitless for the simple reason that no real agreement exists over the meaning of the word. Fundamental disagreement over the exact implications seems to suggest that any but the most conservative definition will be disputed. In fact, its descriptive capacity has been severely undermined by disagreements over its exact implications. Additionally, its connotations are so poisonous that all reason seems to evaporate upon its mention. Therefore, scholarly debate must admit two *faits accomplis*. First, the word has become virtually useless as a meaningful descriptive tool except for purely theoretical and a very few historical cases. Second, the word carries such passion and opinion

³ Many consider Jean-Baptiste Carrier's mission at Nantes from September 1793 to February 1794 to be a related event. Although moments of overlap did occur, Carrier and the Nantais Terror were generally highly localized. The authorities most responsible for the war in the Vendée do not seem to have concerned themselves greatly with Carrier or Nantes except insofar as it served as logistical support for the war.

that it has become most useful as a propaganda tool, duly deployed as a political situation or personal bent demands.

Nevertheless, genocide studies have made valuable contributions to understanding mass killing. Work that originated in the field of Holocaust studies has been integrated into chapter four. Chapter five will also identify some of the work that still has a great bearing on mass killing and that serves more effectively as a descriptive agent. In other words, it will show that the loss of a word need not mean the loss of a field.

The ultimate purpose of this thesis is to highlight the need for extreme revision. The rigidities of the debate, the power of its myths and the passion of its traditional exponents must be undercut to allow a fresh view of the issue. It is the great advantage of Anglophone scholars to be far removed from the contentious French academies and local enthusiasts. Now, more than ever, the time is ripe to dismantle the old understandings and continue the work of Charles Tilly, Claude Petitfrère and Marcel Facheux, to re-examine rigorously what happened in the Vendée and why.

In the final analysis, thinking ecologically about the Vendée renders a substantially different perspective of the uprising. In this perspective, the war was one of survival, in which the participants identified the system that best defended their interests and sought to evade or combat opposing systems. While these systems may have informed the decision to fight, they were almost certainly used to construct meaning and make sense of a frightening and confusing situation. Confusing the survival instinct with ideological motive is a dangerous misunderstanding of the nature of man and the potential of all of us to act irrationally and angrily.

CHAPTER 2

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE VENDÉE

Attempts to explain the rising and the ensuing violence have often focused on the ideology of the opposing groups. Republicans (*bleus*) characterized themselves as warriors for liberty fighting against infatuated and ignorant Catholics, while the rebels (*blancs*) saw themselves as brave freedom fighters struggling for traditional values against intrusive and atheistic Republicans. This theme was solidified in the nineteenth century with the rise of the polemicists, and has only begun to crumble with the advent of *annaliste* and social history in the mid-twentieth century.

Well before General Lazare Hoche had managed to finally subdue the Vendée, Republicans and revolutionaries already were beginning to debate the course of the war. The revolutionary period itself saw the publication of two particularly powerful works, Joseph Marie Lequinio's *Guerre de la Vendée et des Chouans* (1794), and Gracchus Babeuf's modestly titled *La Vie et les Crimes de Carrier Député de Cantal: Son Procès, Celui de Comité Révolutionnaire de Nantes* (1795). Though the latter received little attention in its own day, both were masterful examples of Republican and revolutionary attempts to cope with the idea of a rebellion and its brutal suppression. Both exhibit a typically Republican penchant for explaining the rebellion of the Vendéens and the Republican response in terms of plotting and cliques. In other words, everything that happened was the result of clandestine groups working secretly behind closed doors on both sides. Similarly, both rely heavily on the dissemination of proper Republican ideals to end the rebellion and restore French unity.

Lequinio's work is uniquely critical of the Republican response in the Vendée. In early 1794, Lequinio himself was sent as a Representative on Mission to Charente and Charente-

Inferieur, both of which were just south of the *Vendée Militaire*. Working from Fontenoy-le-Comte (Fontenoy-le-Peuple), he issued a report in March 1794 condemning the activity of Republican troops. This report later formed the first part of the book that Lequinio left to posterity. It is critical to note that Lequinio's first report, very damning in itself, appeared before Thermidor (June 1794). Any criticism released after that could be viewed as self-serving, but Lequinio seems to be genuine.

His interpretation of the revolt reflects contemporary orthodoxy. The basically good and simple people were misled by conniving priests and nobles.⁴ Nevertheless, his book is not dedicated to condemning the Vendéens, but rather the Republican response, especially as it was led by Louis Marie Turreau, Jean-Baptiste Huché, Louis Grignon and Maximilian Robespierre. The most important intriguer in Lequinio's interpretation is Robespierre, whom he accuses of fomenting internal dispute to strengthen loyalty to himself, and to create a climate ideal for turning rival cliques against each other. Simply put, he needed not only war, but civil war to create the kind of factional strife necessary for him to manipulate public opinion and do away with his enemies by directing them against one another.⁵ Others were involved, but they were either gullible Republicans or wretched self-serving souls, ready to feed off civil strife the same as Robespierre, but at a much lower level.⁶ This attack on Robespierre, however, was in the part of the book added after Thermidor, and should therefore be taken cautiously.

Lequinio's commentary on Republican violence is genuinely amazing. In an ambiguous statement in his report, he noted that even if it were possible to simply kill all of the Vendéens – and he argued emphatically that it was not – such an action would be entirely undesirable.⁷

⁴ Joseph-Marie Lequinio, *Guerres de la Vendée et des Chouans* (Paris, An III), 11, 161.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 153-55.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 157-58.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

Instead, he explains the revolt of the peasantry through both the inflammatory behavior of the priests and the arrogant and offensive conduct of the urban population of the region.

Furthermore, he suggests that the incendiary campaigns actually worsened the situation because they turned farmers into furious landless vagrants with nothing to lose. Lequinio concedes that a well organized military campaign would have served to strike at the truly dangerous core of Royalist troops. Yet, regarding the larger issue of violence, he questions whether or not such brutality, or even killing, could really co-exist with Republicanism. He notes that “one plunges mankind into servitude when he uses force, and never by this means has man known how to bring about liberty.”⁸

The appropriate path to healing this open wound was to undo the system of violence, to denounce and end Christianity, but to do so with love and care.⁹ In order to do this, Republican officials needed to go to the countryside and stage festivals, issue pamphlets that used language accessible even to the simplest of people and restrict military operations to carefully planned surgical strikes executed by highly disciplined soldiers. In Lequinio’s opinion, it was only by acknowledging that real brutality had occurred that Republican France could truly move past such a brutal episode. His work serves to both reassure the people that the danger had passed, but equally to assert that the wound still needed to be fully healed.¹⁰

It is less surprising that a similar condemnation should come from the even more radically egalitarian and pacific Gracchus Babeuf. As regards the origins of the conflict, Babeuf follows the same basic premise that the people were good, but were driven to rebellion by abrasive Republican evangelism, which he compares to Spanish attempts to convert the South

⁸ Ibid., 20, 182, 179.

⁹ Ibid., 171-75.

¹⁰ Ibid., 3-5.

Americans.¹¹ He too suggests that Robespierre was behind the brutality, but he makes the more radical claim that it was intended to depopulate the region to provide land for Republicans.¹² Brutal Republicans like Carrier were only ignorant puppets of this greater scheme.¹³ Furthermore, in a tone very similar to Lequinio, he claims that the Representative on Mission system had been corrupted because only legislators were allowed to serve. Their unlimited powers led to a system based on caprice rather than law, the most critical foundation of Republican egalitarianism.¹⁴ Babeuf was never widely read, but his work has re-emerged in recent decades to be moderately influential on modern historians.

One of the more enduring and equitable works bequeathed to history by the historians of the Republican era was the massive six volume documentary collection on the war by J. J. Savary entitled *Guerres des Vendéens et des Chouans contre la République Française* (1824-1825). Published anonymously after 1824, it remains one of the great classics on the Vendée, and a piece of scholarship that could easily satisfy modern standards. Savary may well have had his biases. While a native of the Vendée, he was also a republican officer. Nevertheless, his work remains strikingly free of obvious bias. This results, most likely, from the fact that he followed a tradition of revolutionary scholarship to write history by connecting extensive excerpts of source documents with commentary. Unlike many contemporary authors, Savary begins his work with a reflection on the historiography of the Vendée, lamenting the paucity of documentary research, noting that authors contented themselves to consult a few memoirs and the official government

¹¹ Gracchus Babeuf, *La Vie et les Crimes de Carrier Député de Cantal: Son Procès, Celui de Comité Révolutionnaire de Nantes*, in *La Guerre de la Vendée et la système de la Dépopulation*, ed. Reynald Secher (Paris: Cerf, 2008), 127-28.

¹² *Ibid.*, 116. This is akin to Nazi hopes to repopulate eastern Europe with Germans.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 107-18.

newspaper, the *Moniteur*.¹⁵ In fact, Savary remains the premier source of primary documents for military operations. More importantly, his documentary evidence uncovers the real brutality of the war, especially the march of the Infernal Columns in early 1794, though this may understandably be a bit sanitized. Yet in this, Savary stands apart as an exception.¹⁶

Thus, the early Republican literature, even considering its post-Thermidorian origins, was highly critical of the violence in the Vendée. Moreover, it was wont to excuse the “people” as ignorant and easily led astray by fanatical priests and jealous nobles. The true failure of the Vendée, in this summation, was a failure of Republican humanitarianism and eloquence. Had the Republican tongue not been tied by fear and egotism, it would have responded gently and paternally to the needs of the people, rather than driving them into the arms of the priests and nobles. But equally important to note is the fact that nowhere is the revolt excused. It was not legitimate; it was right to repress it and restore Republican rule.

Still, history is only written by the victors if the destruction of the losers was sufficiently total to bar a response. Beginning with Jacques Créteineau-Joly’s work, *Histoire de la Vendée Militaire* (1840-1843), the people, or more importantly the religious leaders of the Vendée, went on the offensive. This is not surprising. The 1840s saw a serious conservative resurgence as well as a new anti-Christian campaign, and the Revolution itself remained a contested possibility until 1871. The French Revolution was not over. Advocates of both sides continued to throw their rhetorical weight into a battle that often served less as historical narrative than as a field of ideological competition.

¹⁵ Jean-Jules Savary, *Guerres des Vendéens et des Chouans contre la République Française, Volume I* (Paris: Badouin Frères, 1824), 2-3.

¹⁶ Savary’s work came out during a period of intense publication by Royalist leaders, especially their wives. Both the Marquise de Rochejaquelin’s memoirs and those of Bonchamps, two of the most oft cited works from the war, were published at this time. One can only guess, but it may be that Savary’s work came partially in response to the outpouring of Royalist literature.

Joly remains one of the most famous *blanc* historians. Thus, one is not surprised by his basic assessment of the Revolution:

They would reverse all, on the specious pretext of putting everything back in place. With great and virtuous phrases, they would divine vice. With words of conciliation, with promises of universal felicity, they would introduce disorder into the families, anarchy into the state, fire into society....They burned the chateaus to later gain the right to bring the same fire to the cottages.¹⁷

In the face of Republican writing, Joly not only condemns the Revolution, he also praises the Vendéens. While at times he shows only thinly veiled sympathy for the Vendéens, at others he openly elevates the rebels to the level of martyrs. At one point, he refers to the band that followed Cathelineau in early March by saying that “of all the illustrious names of history, no time has any more glorious or pure to note.”¹⁸

At the same time, the Republican memorialists (*bleus*) were experiencing a revival, such that their champion Jules Michelet could cry:

Alas! Horrible savages! You, you condemn yourselves. The words of ferocious egotism, they fall on your own heads. Because you do not only say: “What does France matter? But: What of Brittany? – And: Who cares about Maine-et-Loire?” The Vendéen would not deign to give aid to the Chouan [nor would they trust each other].¹⁹

Michelet had still harsher words. Cathelineau, far from being the beloved itinerant vendor and wagonner, was the stupid lackey of a plotting Church. These are the words from Michelet’s *Histoire de la Révolution Française* (1847-1853), which was the clarion call for Romantic

¹⁷ Jacques Créteineau-Joly, *Histoire de la Vendée militaire, Volume I* (Paris: Hivert, 1840), 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁹ Jules Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française, Tome II, Volume I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 264.

nationalist historiography. It was supremely ideological. The Revolution was, at its core, a battle between itself and Christianity, a radical attempt to reconcile grace and justice under the auspices of the law.²⁰ Thus, although the people of the Vendée were inherently good, they were thoroughly manipulated by the Church, desperately clinging to its power. Although Michelet was the most radical of the major Republican historians of the French Revolution, his work was sufficient to cement the anti-clerical and plot-based interpretation of the Vendée in Republican literature.

Indeed, Reynald Secher has gone so far as to claim that Michelet was the official voice for the rehabilitation of the Revolution initiated under the reforming monarch Louis-Philippe.²¹ Nevertheless, in subsequent years numerous chairs of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne have rendered a far more balanced interpretation of the rising in the Vendée.²² Republican propaganda and martyrologies do exist, but they are not nearly as entrenched or influential as Secher would have the reader believe. Thus, even if Michelet intended to inaugurate a new round of political propaganda, his attempts failed. He represents the crescendo of Republican hagiography, and the discussion continued in more reasonable and balanced terms.

As much as the age of polemicists had begun, it was to be interrupted by one of the most outstanding works on the Vendée to date. Charles-Louis Chassin's eleven volume history of the conflicts in the west, published between 1892 and 1900, remains one of the key works on the Vendée. No scholar can claim to be familiar with the field without studying his compilations. Chassin focuses on presenting almost pure documentation rather than synthesizing and interpreting. In this effort, he faced many of the same challenges as Savary, finding that almost

²⁰ Jule Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française, Tome I, Volume I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 76.

²¹ Reynald Secher, *La Désinformation autour des guerres de Vendée et du génocide Vendéen* (Anet: Atelier Fol'fer, 2009), 29.

²² Alphonse Aulard, *The French Revolution, Volume II*, trans. Bernard Miall (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1910); Albert Mathiez, *The French Revolution*, trans. Catherine Allison Phipps (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964); Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution, from 1793 to 1799*, trans. John Hall Stewart and James Friguglietti (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964).

none of the mayor's offices (excepting Les Sables D'Olonne) had any official documents prior to 1795.²³ Thus, he exceeded Savary in collecting documents from disparate locales.

To be sure, Chassin had Republican sympathies, and he willingly employs the adjective “fanatical” to describe priests whom otherwise could be called “devout.”²⁴ Nor does Chassin attempt to hide this fact, stating in his introduction that “we believe a study so full of horrors as the Vendée...can only render civil war hateful and, above all else, inspire love for *la patrie* and liberty.” Almost in the same breath, he states the overall purpose of the first part of his series is to explain how noble plots and clerical dissimulation led to a rising of the good, but simple minded people.²⁵ In the face of such an introduction, one might expect the work to be almost worthless due to a Republican bias. However, despite the bias, Chassin readily exposes Republican failings and crimes, particularly during the period of repression in 1793-1794. He does so from the perspective of local Republican patriots who were persecuted by Republican forces from outside the Vendée, and so is not entirely equitable in the sense that Royalist perspectives are rarely presented, but the attempt is made. Moreover, he does attempt to consult Royalist documents and scholarship. Although admirably balanced for its time, it was still a story of archaic Christianity and monarchialism versus the enlightened gospel of revolution, even if not as vitriolic as Michelet or Lequinio.

Between the 1920s and 1960s, two authors dominated the field who did little to add to the argument but much to maintain the traditional line. In the 1920s and 30s, the prolific author Emile Gabory wrote several histories of the Vendée between the Revolution and the

²³ Charles-Louis Chassin, *La Préparation de la Guerre de Vendée, 1789-1793, Volume I* (Paris: Imprimerie Paul Dupont, 1892), vi.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, xiii-xiv.

Restoration.²⁶ Elegantly phrased, highly detailed and reasonably balanced, they provide what are arguably the best single volume histories on the respective periods. Nevertheless, they are basically Royalist in their bent. The importance of Gabory's work lies less in any significant changes it wrought in the field than the enduring legacy of his readership. His is one of the most frequently cited sources for the conflict. As such, he has done much to entrench the Royalist perspective. In 1953, Gérard Walter published what is considered to be the pivotal work on the military formation of the Royalists during the *Grande Guerre*.²⁷ Walter is wholly sympathetic to the Vendéen cause and basically refers to it as a religious war, but he still attempts to affect a tone of neutrality and pretends to sidestep the issue.²⁸ In so doing, Walter followed a general pattern of military works that refrained from extreme language, preferring a description of operations.

The first serious challenge to the religious motivation thesis of the Vendéens came from Marcel Facheux, very much in the vein of the *annalistes*.²⁹ For the first time, serious consideration and attention was accorded to the issue of taxation. Facheux made the inglorious but critical observation that the new regime actually increased the financial burden of the peasant in the west. Such critical evidence greatly weakened the purely ideological interpretation of the Vendée.

The next salvo from the *Annaliste* School, coming from the American Charles Tilly, concerned the issue of class. In short, for economic reasons, the bourgeoisie found good reason to invest in the Revolution, while the peasants did not. Increasing bourgeois support for the Revolution led to rural discontent. For the first time, Tilly demands that an equal amount of

²⁶ Emile Gabory, *Les Guerres de Vendée* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1989).

²⁷ The *Grande Guerre* was the period from March 1793 to December 1793 when an actual Royalist and Catholic Army existed, after which it broke into numerous small bands of guerrilla resistance.

²⁸ Gérard Walter, *La Guerre de Vendée* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1953), frontespiece.

²⁹ Marcel Facheux, *L'Insurrection Vendéenne de 1793: Aspects Economiques et Sociaux* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1964).

emphasis fall on the period before 1793 - now a commonly accepted position - but a great change from the majority of works to that point, which view 19 March as the “beginning” of the war in the Vendée.³⁰ However, far from being a reductionist, Tilly sees the birth of the rebellion in response to the conscription law of 1793 as the focalization of numerous religious, political and economic differences between the peasants and the bourgeoisie.³¹ One can argue that Tilly was simply continuing the analysis of Chassin, who did dedicate three volumes to the period leading to the final break in March 1793. However, Tilly decidedly broke with the idea that it was religious plotting or rampant royalism that led to the revolt, but rather a combination of factors, such as growing economic discontent that was blended with fervent religious belief.³² As such, the common man had the motive to revolt without prodding from the priests, and the aristocracy certainly was not as important as previously suspected. Moreover, while religion remained a key factor, it ceased to be a simple matter of referring to religious fanaticism, but rather of religion and spirituality in relation to greater socio-economic and political trends.

Tilly’s work represents a major transition for Vendéen history. The old *blanc-bleu* dichotomy remains, but its shape shifted almost beyond recognition as scholars attempted to simultaneously revisit old feuds and radically reconstruct the methodological approach to the Vendée. Unfortunately, one of the first to follow in this school was a rather angry Vendéen student at the Sorbonne, Reynald Secher. *Condemnation of Republican violence*, by Republican authors, had already reached a level of rhetorical polish. It was brutal, it was excessive, and it was distinctly unrevolutionary, *à la* Lequinio. No one really doubted that it was excessive. But

³⁰ Chassin and Lallié are the only traditional scholars that seem to have addressed the pre-war in any great length before Tilly.

³¹ Charles Tilly, *The Vendée* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 305-10.

³² *Ibid.*, 226.

this is a subdued admission.³³ Secher, in what is otherwise only a mediocre work of synthesis, upended this when he referred to the Republican reaction in the late winter and spring of 1794 as a genocide.³⁴ Although generally unaccepted, it has fanned the flames of debate as less scholarly chroniclers of the Vendée have echoed Secher's cry, notably Simone Loidreau. This, he claimed, was the result of totalitarianism similar to those of the twentieth century, and the fruit of Republican ideology.³⁵

The first scholar to offer a more balanced perspective was Jean-Clément Martin. His landmark work, *La Vendée et la France*, is equally exciting and far more constructive than Secher's. More than any other author, he grasped that the Vendée, far from being a homogenous region in any sense, was the creation of the National Assembly. In other words, it was the National Assembly that labeled the Vendée, which was in truth little more than a region characterized by widespread local revolts, and thus gave it prominence and a national stage. Given that the revolt actually encompassed four departments, the *Vendée Militaire* is a creation not of the Vendéens themselves, who were simply resisting locally, but of the greater political body of France.³⁶ He draws special attention to the idea that a series of disparate revolts became a war, rather than an uprising as they occurred at Lyon and Toulon, and notes that it was a conscious title applied by the politicians at the time.³⁷

Thus, Martin largely confirms the ideological understanding of the Vendée, at least in the sense that it was ideology that created it in the first place and ideology, from the Republican side, that dictated its response. He takes another critical step, however, when he comments on the violence of the repression. Martin effectively argues that the violence that marked this period

³³ See, for example, Lefebvre, 84-85.

³⁴ Reynald Secher, *A French Genocide: The Vendée*, trans George Holoch (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003 [1986]), 111.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 115-16.

³⁶ Jean-Clément Martin, *La Vendée et la France* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1987), 15.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

was in no way a pure product of the Revolution, but was instead an intensification of an inclination toward violence that was common to the eighteenth century.³⁸ As such, to claim that it was all Republican ideology is to ignore the overwhelming reality of violence at the time, into which the Revolution fit rather than created. This does not deny the importance of Revolutionary ideology. Yet, these decisions occurred in a terribly confused and irregular state of affairs, and the violence exhibited was simply one expression of an extremely diverse event, for which no one logic existed.³⁹ Thus, Martin came as an advocate of realism and moderation to a field all too inclined toward ideology and recrimination. In essence, by seeing the practical needs of people to classify and cope with real problems, he opened a completely new level of understanding.

An equally great historian, Alain Gérard, has continued this more nuanced approach: “At this moment, the war imposed the concept of the Vendée, thereby creating a region separate from the new regime.”⁴⁰ In his work *La Vendée, 1789-1793*, he accuses past historians of a teleological approach, focusing on the similarities rather than the difference between the “douze pays” that constituted the region.⁴¹ Unlike Martin, he suggests that the revolt was forced into being by the Revolutionaries in two senses. First, they enacted certain policies that antagonized the peasantry. Second, and more importantly, they saw resistance as plotting, not as negotiation.⁴² In this framework, any resistance to or disagreement with the ideals of the Revolution constituted an attempt at counter-revolution. At the risk of being base, the local patriots who formed themselves into militias were a self-satisfied minority, content that they

³⁸ Ibid., 238, 241.

³⁹ Ibid., 234.

⁴⁰ Alain Gérard, *La Vendée, 1789-1793* (Mayenne: Champs Vallon, 1992), 20.

⁴¹ “Douze pays” translates poorly into English. Douze, of course, is twelve. “Pays” translates as “country,” but it is important to recognize that “pays” could also mean region, which could be as small as a parish or a section of a river valley. Thus, many Frenchmen at the time of the Revolution would have found it hard to identify themselves as “French” or even “Angevine.” Reference to a town or parish was far more likely.

⁴² Ibid., 21.

were the incarnation of the Revolution, that any challenge to them was a challenge to the Revolution, and that the only possible meaning of a challenge was a plot to end the Revolution.⁴³

Gérard's key contribution is his suggestion that the "issues" of the revolt, or specifically the differences between the groups at hand, were far less important than the manner in which they were presented. Thus, neither the ultra-democratic, insular and religious peasants nor the enlightened, republican, and self-satisfied bourgeoisie, was willing to compromise; all discussion became "a dialogue of the deaf."⁴⁴ As such, the conflict was one of fanaticism; the exact contents of that fanaticism were far less important than the fanaticism itself. Consequently, the war was both supremely ideological and totally unnecessary. Like Secher, Gérard insists that ideology lay beneath the brutal repression of the Vendée in early 1794, although he does not call it genocide. Despite the end of the war in December 1793, it was a radical republican ideology that claimed superiority over normal morality to subvert and deform the nature of the Revolution into a punitive expedition meant to purify France.⁴⁵ In sum, the Republicans were so utterly convinced of their role in creating a new world that they carried it to the extremes of dogmatic persistence.

In a manner recalling Tilly and Martin, Guy-Marie Lenne contests traditional dichotomies in his beautifully written *Les Réfugiés des Guerres de Vendée, de 1793 à 1796*. With great creativity, Lenne chooses to address an issue that is glossed over by both Royalist and Republican memorialists. In so doing, he exposes the crux of the genocide argument. Genocide would have required the decision to destroy all Vendéens, or at least those accused of Royalism. In fact, a great many were sent away, even if grudgingly.⁴⁶ Moreover, his research on the original orders for the removal of the population proves that they were terribly unclear. A very good

⁴³ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁵ Alain Gérard, "*Par Principe d'Humanité...*" *La Terreur et la Vendée* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 28.

⁴⁶ Guy-Marie Lenne, *Les Réfugiés des Guerres de Vendée, de 1793 à 1796* (La Crèche: Geste, 2003), 34-35.

chance exists that the Representatives on Mission responsible for the order felt they were under extreme pressure from Paris to take such an action even though no such order was given. In other words, it was not because they thought it ideologically correct or because they wanted to wipe out the Vendéens.⁴⁷ Several commentators, including D.M.G. Sutherland, note that, whether or not resistance in the Vendée had slackened after December 1793, it was still present, and both the infernal columns and the population removal plans were blunt object solutions to a problem that required a finesse that the Republicans had already proven themselves lacking.⁴⁸

How exactly this has carried into the English literature is another question altogether. Most Anglo-American authors have relied on a very few sources. Almost criminally, the most recent works, such as David Bell's *The First Total War* (2007), do not consider works by Gérard, Facheux, Lenne, Martin and numerous other reputable sources. Many read Tilly, Petitfrère and Chassin, but few read the purer documentation in Savary. In sum, the true richness of Vendéen historiography has been ignored by non-French scholars. Admittedly, it has taken time for French scholars to approach the question more dispassionately. Nevertheless, it is happening. Future study will demand that anglo-american scholars, while not rejecting the classics of Chassin and Savary, significantly expand their repertoire to include the newest works by Lenne, Martin and Gérard, while eschewing more sensationalist and truly polemical works such as those of Secher.

The field can be said to consist of two schools; the polemicists and the revisionists. Broadly speaking, the polemicists are those authors that have made clear judgments about the justness of the cause they are defending. This group can be further subdivided into highly qualified and moderately qualified polemicists. In the Republican camp, Lequinio and Babeuf

⁴⁷ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁸ D.M.G. Sutherland, Review of « *Par Principe d'Humanité... » La Terreur et la Vendée*, in *The Journal of Modern History* 74 (September 2002): 649-650.

are both highly qualified. They accept the cause of the Revolution as just, but thoroughly excoriate the means by which it had been executed. Michelet is a moderately qualified Republican. Even he recoils from the void when he discusses Turreau's columns.⁴⁹ None question the legitimacy of the Revolution or the fact that the rebels had erred dangerously. None really questioned that it needed to be suppressed. It was only a question of method.

Royalists have maintained their critical opinion of the republican forces and values, but they too have moderated themselves. Crétineau was probably the least qualified, thoroughly lambasting the Revolution and all that it held to be true. Otherwise, Royalists have become increasingly qualified. One can barely perceive the distaste for Republicanism in the basically very good works of Alain Gérard. Reynald Secher and the few that follow him constitute an extremely loud fringe. Although more influential now in Anglophone circles, his influence is fading in France.

The most remarkable feature, however, is the degree to which the polemical works fail to describe the real structures of society in western France and the republican military operating in those areas. The peasants and the soldiers are both presented as monolithic blocks, countless gears driving the engines of their respective movements. The Vendéens were motivated by their hatred of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and of conscription, the Republicans by their ideology and the quest for revenge. More than anything else, the obstruction to further exploration was due to the fact that these authors were ultimately making value judgments. Whether they did so before or after writing began seems less important than the fact that both groups hurled accusations rather than sharing information.

This has been remedied to some degree. Authors since the 1960s have focused overwhelmingly on description. However, scholars like Faucheux remain buried, referenced only

⁴⁹ Jules Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française* (Paris: Chamerot, 1853), 6: 280-281.

by the best works and certainly underemphasized. The value judgment of the Vendée retains its allure. This is no doubt in part because, as with any simple explanation, it is easy and clear. The idea that large portions of either side fought primarily for self-preservation conflicts with the values-based interpretation because it relegates the supposedly primary causes to means of expression, rationalization and organization.

In sum, major advances have been made in the field, but the revision they have inspired has not been fully adopted. Most authors still appear committed to explaining the conflict in ideological parameters rather than in mundane terms of human confusion and self-preservation. The logical road of the ideology argument is toward extremes like labeling the conflict a genocide and toward gross overgeneralization. Rather, the ecological angle that will be taken in the following chapters pursues a flexible and descriptive approach. In the latter method, the complex relationship between mundane personal imperatives and ideological expressions of culture can be treated more carefully. Ultimately, it offers a far greater descriptive capacity because it welcomes a wide diversity of motives that find a common outlet, rather than a common motive with a unified vision that never existed.

*La Vendée Militaire*⁵⁰



⁵⁰ Wikipedia.fr, accessed 5-9-2011. http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Carte_de_la_Vend%C3%A9e_militaire.svg.

CHAPTER 3

A SHORT NARRATIVE

The area referred to as the *Vendée Militaire* encompasses a large section of western France. In the north, it is bound by the Loire river valley from Paimboeuf to Angers and Saumur. From there its eastern boundary runs south along the Thouet through Thouars and down to Parthenay, and then west through Fontenoy-le-Comte and Luçon to finally reach the ocean at Les Sables D'Olonne. Appearances are deceptive, however, as the region does not constitute a cohesive geographic or cultural area *per se*. In the north along the Loire, the country is marked by low, rolling hills and relatively dense vegetation. The hedgerow country, the *bocage*, constitutes the heart of the region and runs from the south of Cholet to the Fontenoy – Sables axis, marked by a line of hills running from northwest to southeast from La Gaubretière to just north of the town of L'Absie. This is a broken and dense country, impenetrable to many. In the west, between the Boulogne, the Vie and the sea is the Marais, a flat, open land of reclaimed swamp.

Properly speaking, the region is simply a concept, a title affixed to an area of revolt by the Revolutionary government that remained associated with the region after the rebellion. Perhaps the only truly unifying aspect of the people was isolation. Although not poor, the entire region between the plains south of the Fontenoy-Sables axis in the south and the Loire in the north was considered a backwater, though certain scholars would dispute the veracity of that conclusion.⁵¹ Few major cites existed on the periphery, let alone the center, and hubs like Cholet hardly constituted bustling metropolises. The great city of Nantes, the first city in France to boast a public reading room in 1759, was oriented toward the sea. Actively engaged in commerce,

⁵¹ Tilly, *The Vendée*, 37.

notably the slave trade, and located on a prime trading route, the nantais had little reason to concern themselves with the surrounding hinterland, and usually obtained their food locally.⁵²

Similarly, the *paysans* did not feel much need to concern themselves with the cities. Indeed, it was during the Great Fear that the peasants in the countryside first took fright at armed *nantais*, assuming that the *citadins* were intending to seize their last remaining grain stocks.⁵³ Some certainly migrated to cities for work in off years, but that was common throughout France.⁵⁴ Eugen Weber's description of the French peasant in the nineteenth century held all the more true in the eighteenth; they were insular and suspicious of outsiders. Nor is this surprising. Most accounts of the Vendée portray the *paysans* as either simple, honest and religious folk, or as basically good but ignorant and superstitious simpletons, depending on one's perspective. This was only exacerbated by the difficulty of transversing the region. Beyond the naturally dense vegetation, roads existed often in name only. Many were impassable with even the slightest rainfall.⁵⁵

Few historians take care to mention it as a region reknowned for its role in smuggling. The areas between the Lay and Sevre Nantais and the sea enjoyed a reduced rate on the infamous salt tax, the *gabelle*. Salt was produced in great quantities on the Charentais Islands to the south, on Noirmoutier and in the Pay de Retz. The price of fifty kilograms of salt jumped from perhaps one livres to sixty beyond this line. Paired with the broken country and exceedingly proud locals, the terrain was ideal for smuggling, and the locals made ample use of the opportunity.⁵⁶ This combination of distrust of outsiders and the experience that many locals had in smuggling later served as a powerful vehicle for low level resistance to Republican officials. Clandestine

⁵² Jean-Joël Brégeon, *Carrier et la Terreur Nantaise* (Paris: Perrin, 2002), 62.

⁵³ Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789*, trans. Joan White (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 144.

⁵⁴ William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 18.

⁵⁵ Dominique Gautron, "L'Etat des Routes de Vendée en 1793," in *Histoire Militaire des Guerres de Vendée*, ed. Hervé Coutau-Bégaire (Paris: Economica, 2010), 97-98.

⁵⁶ Robert Ducluzeau, *La Gabelle et la Contrebande du Sel dans l'Ouest* (La Crèche: Geste, 2008), 25, 353-58.

behavior that drew on this experience ranged from hiding non-juring priests to the expert *chouannerie* deployed by locals well into 1796.

In certain respects, the deeper into the *bocage* one went, the more it became a land that time forgot. Several months before the Estates-General, an angry letter was issued by a local noble to Comptroller-General Jacques Necker, stating that the country was basically poor, yielded few good crops and was badly isolated, but still had been highly taxed in money and labor to work on roads that did them no good.⁵⁷ The Marquise de la Rochejaquelein paints an idyllic picture of lords attending peasant weddings, distributing advice in the cottages and the peasants gladly lining up to help the lord on his weekend boar hunt.⁵⁸ Most authors accept this close relationship between lord and peasant as true, one going so far as to say that the spoken word was as good as a contract in the heart of Bas-Poitou.⁵⁹ It is also worth bearing in mind that the vast majority of such sources derive from the minority of local nobles who did not emigrate and fought for the rebel cause. They were, in other words, not Catholic noble savages as some Royalist authors may paint them. It was a region of homogenous values, but that was true of much of Catholic France. More importantly, it was an isolated land, filled with people, noble and commoner alike, who wished to be left in peace.

However, one exception did exist. Throughout the region, a very small group of individuals had gained the money and the education to constitute a bourgeois. This small group attempted to reach beyond their enclave for the broader world. In fact, in one of the most brilliant pieces written on the Vendée, Charles Tilly has suggested that it was the rapidly increasing intersection of urban and rural life that made the region so volatile. In his view, an aggressive merchant bourgeois in rapidly growing secondary cities like Cholet were extending their

⁵⁷ Mémoire de la Noblesse de la Gâtine et la Bocage, October 1788, in Chassin, 1:12.

⁵⁸ Madame la Marquise de Rochejaquelein, *Mémoires* (Paris: Badouin Frères, 1823), 34.

⁵⁹ Armel de Wismes, *Histoire de la Vendée* (Paris: Franc-Empire, 1994), 132.

influence, without the more traditional concerns of other urban groups like the clergy or royal administrators. It is in this contact that Tilly speaks of the “‘urbanization’ of rural communities.”⁶⁰ Paradoxically, then, the region was not entirely backward, but was rapidly entering the broader economy, increasing the possibility of conflict between old and new systems. These two systems were born in the values and efforts of the conservative peasants and the progressive bourgeoisie. Isolation retained a grip, but friction could be found on the edges.

It is an interesting and inexcusable lacuna in Vendéen history that the structures of rural life have not received more attention. In fact, most histories of the era suffer an entirely understandable inclination to view every aspect of the Revolution as the march of ideology. Thus, the riots in the streets of Paris become grand statements of politics rather than bread riots using different language, as George Rudé so aptly displayed.⁶¹ In fact, Revolutionary history is replete with such strikingly obvious biases toward ideology, toward Paris, toward violence, toward intellectual history, and above all toward the cities. The excellent works of Alan Forrest, George Lefebvre, P. M. Jones and Charles Tilly notwithstanding, profound accounts of the rural experience in the century prior to the Revolution are rare. In most cases, the peasantry is addressed only to say that some decision by the central government offended their religiosity, overburdened them with taxes, or was generally too intrusive, after which sporadic fighting broke out, and no more comment is made on them or their deep social structure and cultural identity.

As we shall see, the Vendée was, above all else, a popular uprising. And yet most authors choose to dwell on the decisions of the Vendéen war chiefs, only briefly mentioning that the chiefs could rarely do what they wanted because peasants went home after the battle. The exact

⁶⁰ Tilly, *Vendée*, 62.

⁶¹ Georges Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

reason for their departure was most likely their desire to remain close to home so they could tend to their fields and protect their families. But the fact that no effective means existed for keeping them with the armies should suggest to the reader that democratic and popular involvement was the very foundation of Vendéen strategy. Popular sentiments and a sense of independence were real and powerful limitations of Vendéen strategy. In other words, a power existed in the form of rural norms, values and wishes that dictated the limits of the army's fighting capacity. It is to those norms that we must now turn.

In truth, no clear explanation of peasant behavior exists. They left no detailed documents of opinion, but a substantial literature on peasant values and structures has grown over the years that provides a valuable brake on the temptation to bypass the peasantry and focus on the discernable elites. Above all else, the modern reader must avoid the temptation to disregard the structures and beliefs of peasant society on the grounds that they were "tradition bound" or "backward." It is true that the peasant was highly traditional. As Pierre Goubert noted of the seventeenth century peasant: "where everything was governed by tradition, and the landscape was a given which nobody dreamed of changing ...any possible innovator was in danger of being thought sacrilegious."⁶² Thus, the peasant was hostile to change, but the question of why remains.

The critical starting point is food. The majority of peasants in the region were subsistence farmers, meaning that they ate what they sowed and any discernable surplus probably went to the local lord or the Church. The scarcity of surplus indicates that the peasant must have lived near the subsistence line the majority of the time, and even in good years must have still pondered starvation as a grave possibility. Samuel Scott has noted the dangers of this framework, as the

⁶² Pierre Goubert, *The French Peasantry in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. Ian Patterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 16.

subsistence line may not simply refer to nutritional requirements, but social trappings and subsequent status judgments.⁶³ However, he also notes quite rightly that the end result in peasant society in Vietnam and Burma was a “safety-first” response, wherein reliance on traditional systems of agriculture that ensured subsistence at the expense of innovation was highly valued.⁶⁴ Given the centrality of food production and the fear of dearth, speculation allows the assumption that the socio-economic and political networks that dominated the peasant world would be carefully controlled to ensure reliable food production.

Now is neither the time nor the place to address the agricultural systems of western France. Of more importance to this thesis is the question of peasant isolation. Eugen Weber has rightly noted the role of isolation in fomenting rumor, superstition and ignorance.⁶⁵ Yet this interpretation ignores the positive aspects of isolation. True, it took decades to repair roads, literacy was low and poverty relief from the state unlikely, but so too it was easier to evade the state and live in a self-governing society.⁶⁶ Outsiders who did not speak the local language were considered intruders who might well represent malevolent powers, such as the tax collector or the police. On the other hand, local institutions like the Church were the bedrock of communal understanding and function.⁶⁷ So too, the stories that Weber provides of priests ringing church bells to ward off hail do not suggest that these actions were altogether voluntary, but rather conformed to the people’s beliefs about how the world functioned.⁶⁸ Thus, the peasant had good

⁶³ Samuel Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), vii.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, viii, 1-3.

⁶⁵ Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 44.

⁶⁶ James Scott has offered some exciting new ideas in *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). Essentially, he suggests a certain intentional isolation and backwardness meant to avoid government control. Some of his ideas may be useful for understanding western France, but the region’s rural history needs more clarification before more specific comparisons can be drawn.

⁶⁷ Goubert, *Peasantry*, 156.

⁶⁸ Weber, *Peasants*, 24-27.

reason, in her or his mind, to defend against outsiders and innovation. As Goubert notes of the seventeenth century peasants, they revolted most frequently not against taxes, but against new taxes.⁶⁹

These, then, were the people who actually started the rebellion. And yet, when the Revolution arrived, the initial changes were not as disruptive as one might think. Most authors and memoirists skim over the period before the CCC with little or no commentary on the public response to the Revolution, other than to say that the peasants were basically happy to be rid of the seigniorial dues and the tithe. Only the Republican memorialist Mercier du Rocher notes that the people of Poitou took up arms during the Great Fear of 1789.⁷⁰ The fact of the matter is that the peasants probably simply believed, after a few initial scares, that a new Utopia of official non-interference was about to dawn and that they could continue their old lives, except more cheaply and peacefully. Feudal dues were to be abolished, the tithe terminated, and the old system of exploitation decimated.

Thus, 1789 and 1790 were basically quiet years, punctuated only by the occasional bread riot, but nothing unusual for the area. In fact, aside from the Great Fear, the period until the passing of the CCC on 12 July 1790 was noticeably quiet. Even then, fear did not really grow until the November decree requiring the oath within two months on pain of loss of position.⁷¹ That said, the groundwork was quietly being laid for a serious dispute in the region. Alain Gérard has brilliantly addressed the period before the revolt. At its core, he suggests, the war in the Vendée was a misunderstanding and an unwillingness to compromise between the rural peasantry and the urban bourgeoisie. Gérard also suggests that early peasant unrest was viewed

⁶⁹ Goubert, *Peasantry*, 206.

⁷⁰ Mercier du Rocher, *Mémoires pour Servir à l'Histoire de la Guerre de Vendée*, ed. Thérèse Rouchette (Loudéac: Yves Salmon, 1989), 42.

⁷¹ The oath called for loyalty to the King, the Constitution, the laws, and to guide the congregants entrusted to their care as an officer of the state.

by urban patriots as deliberate attempts to undo Revolutionary gains. While this opinion was not accentuated at the moment, it laid the foundation for later conflict between the two groups as the bourgeoisie failed to compromise with the peasantry on the grounds that they were, in fact, counterrevolutionary.⁷²

The exact impact of the CCC is difficult to determine, but by the spring and summer of 1791 it was intense. It evoked an immediate response from the likes of Marie Charles Isidore de Mercy, Bishop of Luçon. From Paris he fulminated against the perceived evils of the CCC. At first, he simply backed appeals to tradition and fear of religious faction leading to another round of religious wars.⁷³ Later appeals, however, were not so modest as Mercy referred to juring priests as “ministers of death.”⁷⁴ At this point in the conflict, however, patriots did not respond with atheism or philosophical deism, but instead claimed that the CCC was an effort to uncover and undo the horrible abuses of the high clergy.⁷⁵

Popular responses to the CCC varied across the countryside. In the Mauges, it was met by pilgrimages to Bellefontaine, near Cholet. These movements were quickly subdued by National Guardsmen, laying the bedrock for strong resentment against republican forces. Nevertheless, the situation remained basically peaceful. In Bas Poitou, on the other hand, the peasants violently vented their frustration toward the bourgeois. Blaming them for the loss of their *curés*, the peasants proceeded to break the bourgeois pews in local churches, a decision loaded with symbolic importance in several respects.⁷⁶ Throughout the region, numerous reports tell of juring priests being verbally abused and suffering petty vandalism of their property, and sometimes more direct bodily threats. This resistance was scattered and easily subdued. The refractory

⁷² Alain Gérard, *La Vendée*, 29.

⁷³ Lettre à l’Assemblée Nationale, signé par de Frèsne, Brumauld, etc. n.d. in Chassin, *Préparation*, 1:163-64.

⁷⁴ Lettre à Monsieur Noirod, July 1791, *ibid.*, 1: 183.

⁷⁵ La Municipalité de les Sables-D’Olonnes à ses Concitoyens, 27 January 1791, in *ibid.*, 1: 173.

⁷⁶ Gerard, *Vendée*, 45-47. These will be discussed in more depth in chapter three.

Church went underground, and each side accused the other of using the religious issue for the sake of blatant political opportunism. Thus, Mercier du Rocher accused non-religious nobles of attending the mass of non-juring priests, while numerous Royalist accounts offer a similar litany of atheistic revolutionaries finding religion long enough to attend the Constitutional Masses.⁷⁷ One of the more amusing stories, perhaps apocryphal, is of the non-juring priest who broke into the Church and planted a black cat in the altar's cupboard for the communion set. The coming Sunday the juring priest duly opened the door and out popped the cat, inducing a sudden panic amidst frightened peasants who were convinced that the devil was at work in their church.⁷⁸

The first major explosions arrived shortly after the Pope Pius VI's condemnations of the CCC on 10 March and 13 April 1791. The most notable rising was at Saint-Christoph-de-Lignerion, not far from Challans. Morning mass was not held by the regular clergyman, who was sick, but by the non-juring priest Regain, who used the pulpit to assault the Constitution and preach disobedience. Shortly after, several National Guardsmen were assaulted during a mayoral election. After being driven out of town, they had to await support from the police of La-Roches-sur-Yon and Challans.⁷⁹ Order was restored, but only after cavalry was called in, and even then several peasants attempted to drive them off.⁸⁰

The situation was not improved by the confused attempts of the local authorities to deal with the local refractories. Such was the disorder that the departments of Maine-et-Loire and the Loire-Inferieure passed illegal decrees in May 1791 forcing the imprisonment of non-juring priests who had not vacated their position and were guilty of arousing dissent; the law further forced even those who had vacated their position to move a certain distance from their former

⁷⁷ Rocher, *Mémoires*, 55.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁷⁹ Chassin, *Préparation*, 1:271-72.

⁸⁰ Rocher, *Mémoires*, 62.

parish.⁸¹ This was a flagrant violation of central policies that were noticeably more tolerant. Yet, if Rocher was correct on no other point, the local and central authorities should have chosen consistency above the ideology of religious toleration. The federal decision in September 1791 to release priests that had been imprisoned by departmental authorities effectively unleashed a radicalized opposition and weakened the perceived authority of the government.⁸² Such inconsistencies and contradictions marred virtually every Republican effort in the region from that point forward.

The unrest had a critical impact on the Republican appreciation of the situation. The likes of Rocher had determined their position long ago and needed no more convincing that the situation was lost unless an immediate clampdown was enacted and the non-juring priests were exiled. This was not, however, the only response. In the summer of 1791, a concerned National Assembly sent two Representatives to the region to investigate the unrest; Jean-Antoine Gauvit, known as Gallois, and Armand Gensonné. Their report, researched and written between mid-summer 1791 and its presentation before the newly convened Legislative Assembly on 9 October bears an interesting tension. Ultimately, Gallois and Gensonné suggested that the non-juring priests should be tolerated, thus insinuating that the non-juring priests had committed no flagrant act of treason.⁸³ On the other hand, the same report takes a definite tone of condescension that seems to preclude the possibility that either of the Representatives would ever view Vendéen grievances seriously. Their description of the locals bears quoting at length:

In a country where the difficulty of communication, the simplicity
of a purely agricultural life, childhood lessons and the presence of

⁸¹ Secher, *A French Genocide*, 48-49.

⁸² Rocher quoted in Michael Ross, *Banners of the King: The War of the Vendée 1793* (London: Seeley Service & Co., 1975), 37.

⁸³ Rapport de Gallois et Gensonne au Assemble Legislatif, 9 Octobre 1791, in *Archives Parlementaires de 1787-1860*, vol. XXXIV, ed. J. Madival and E. Laurent (Paris: Paul Dupont, 1890), 147.

a few religious emblems are destined to constantly hold their gaze,
their souls have been opened to a crowd of superstitious
impressions, which cannot be destroyed or moderated by any sense
of enlightenment.⁸⁴

This language belies a self-satisfaction among patriots that later became a serious concern, and a serious obstacle to any discussion or compromise. As chapter three will demonstrate, Gallois and Gensonné had perhaps some of the most moderate voices in the room.

Although persecution of priests became a constant backdrop from that point on, only a few major actions erupted, including a riot at Bressuire on 24 August 1792. The mayor had refused to sign an order to close a convent and had to flee from Republicans in the city. Gathering support amongst angered peasants, an assault was launched on nearby Chatillon, followed by a failed attempt on Bressuire. The battle ended badly for the peasants, who were terribly led into the fire of the relatively organized Republican National Guard. Though the only battle of this period, it marked a turning point for the worst in terms of popular violence.⁸⁵

Local officials gathered sufficient forces to repel the attacks and make good the defense of the region, but the newly minted National Convention seemed less than concerned. On 30 August and 2 September 1792 it finalized a law transferring the departmental capital of Deux-Sevres from Chatillon, where the archives had been burned, to Bressuire. A third article provided a pension for the widows of National Guardsmen.⁸⁶ Once again, Representatives were sent to investigate the uprising. Thus, on 30 September 1792, Xavier Audoin and Loiseau-Grandmaison came to the bar of the National Convention. Their report constitutes an odd mixture of blaming fanatical priests, claiming it was a religious uprising, demonstrating Republican hagiography and

⁸⁴ Ibid., 142.

⁸⁵ Ross, 43-44.

⁸⁶ “Loi Relative aux Troubles de Châtillon-Bressuire,” in Chassin, *Préparation*, 3: 21-22.

offering a germ of insight. Unlike Gallois and Gensonné, their solution for the region did not end with sending good patriots to rouse public spirit. Instead, they suggested the concrete work of building roads to improve the communications and industry of the region.⁸⁷ Despite this report, justice was made the domain of departmental authorities, order was basically restored, and the foreign invasion quickly overshadowed the episode.

The exact motives and dynamics of the response to the CCC will be addressed later in this thesis. For now, the important aspect of the narrative is the fact that no comprehensive and major uprising occurred. While Mercier du Rocher dwells on the period, the Royalist memorialists de Rochejaquelein, Madame de la Bouère and the Marquise de Bonchamps pass over it quickly, noting only that it was met by disaffection.⁸⁸ In short, while the episode certainly angered the peasantry, it was insufficient to push them into continuous and open revolt. In the background, the Legislative Assembly and then the National Convention were content with platitudes and applause to the solid Republican actions of local patriots, adamantly orthodox in their inaction and misunderstanding of the situation.

All groups emerged from the crisis of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy shaken. Nevertheless, for a brief period between the fall of 1791 and the spring of 1793, all remained basically calm, but not without storm clouds on the horizon. An oft neglected aspect of the intervening period is taxes. Not sexy, not trendy, not dark, not violent, they do not fit the traditional means of understanding the Vendée. And yet in between the crisis of the CCC and the conscription crisis of 1793, taxation constitutes one of the more important factors in the region

⁸⁷ Ibid., 23-26.

⁸⁸ Marquise de la Bouère, *La Guerre de la Vendée 1793-1796 : Mémoires Inédits* (Cholet : Les Editions Choletais, 1994), 12 ; Rochejaquelein, 37; Bonchamps, 18-20. Rochejaquelein leaves the interesting note that the peasants were pleased with their original *curés* because they knew both their morals and their patois, yet another reminder of the importance of language.

insofar as it exacerbated rural-urban tensions, which basically also meant conservative-revolutionary, or better yet, peasant – bourgeoisie.

Although John McManners pushes the limits of oversimplification when he suggests that the Vendée was due to taxes, he is one of the few historians to give any credit to this, as yet, underappreciated aspect of the conflict.⁸⁹ Marcel Faucheux's masterful study shows a regular rise in taxation in the region after 1790; that is, after the abolition of the taxes and privileges of the Old Regime.⁹⁰ Of course, an abolished tax did not necessarily mean lighter taxes. The National Assembly assumed the debts of the Old Regime, and so we find the case of the Mauges in which the gabelle was abolished in April 1790, but only hesitantly, and was rapidly compensated for by higher general taxes. It should be noted that the gabelle was only rescinded after serious riots the prior year that resulted in the destruction of significant amounts of private property.⁹¹ Thus, by early 1793, the peasants of the region were challenged by higher taxes, constant persecution of their Church and an antagonistic relationship with an overbearing urban bourgeoisie.

It is very rare to find a clear case of a common people fighting desperately for ideals. Usually, below the surface of admitted ideas and values lies a question of power. However, in the case of the Vendée no such elaborate disentanglement of motive is necessary. The peasantry already had been aggravated by repeated intrusions into their political system, primarily the greater burden of taxes and the forced reform of the Church. Regardless, the final spark cannot be overemphasized. In one moment the modern reader must be prepared to drop the accumulated residue of polemicists and see with utter clarity the event that actually caused the peasants to rise: conscription. Beset by enemies on all sides, France in 1793 had barely survived a year of

⁸⁹ John McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), 82.

⁹⁰ Faucheux, *L'Insurrection Vendéenne*, 263-73.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 285-86.

campaigning and was desperately short of men. As a solution, the National Convention passed a Levy of 300,000 men that was to be filled as much as possible by volunteers, then by conscription.

What might otherwise have been a tolerable measure was compromised in the eyes of the peasants by two facts. First, it was suspiciously similar to the *tirage* for the traditional *milice* of the Old Regime. Boutillier de Saint-André left a graphic image of peasants at the *tirage* before the Revolution: apprehensively waiting, wailing and tearing out their hair if their number was drawn. No reason exists to suspect that this attitude had changed.⁹² Second, the conscription law allowed numerous exemptions and substitutes, allowing for conscription by election or by lot, either one of which could be easily manipulated. Exemptions were especially onerous to the peasantry because it excused functionaries, who were overwhelmingly bourgeoisie.⁹³

The first serious uprising occurred at Cholet on 2 March 1793 when preliminary news of the law arrived. In fact, the actual method for selection was unknown, but apprehensive peasants immediately assumed that it would be the *tirage au sort*, highly reminiscent of the old selection for the militia. Over the next few days, rumor spread rapidly and the gatherings in Cholet grew increasingly restive until a riot finally erupted on 4 March. Authorities were forced to open fire on the mob, mortally wounding three and lightly wounding several more.⁹⁴

In a quick narrative, it is all too easy to gloss over the exact nature of the reactions to the draft in pithy sentences about peasants rising indignantly against further imposition. In this case, the riot at Saint-Florent-le-Vieil remains instructive. An insufficient number of men volunteered, and so on Sunday 10 March, the procureur-syndic of the town announced the draft for the

⁹² Boutillier de Saint-André, *Mémoires d'un Père à ses Enfants: Une Famille Vendéen pendant la Grande Guerre 1793-1795* (Paris: Plon, 1896), 54.

⁹³ Alan Forrest, *Soldiers of the French Revolution* (Durham: Duke university Press, 1990), 68-71.

⁹⁴ Gabory, *Les Guerres*, 99-101.

upcoming Tuesday, immediately after which he was assaulted and knocked down by several members of the substantial crowd.⁹⁵ When 12 March finally arrived, it was greeted by large crowds of angry men. Accounts differ on whether or not the Republicans had sited a cannon against the crowd, but that probably made little difference. Before the drawing could begin, a shot came out of the crowd, killing the official pulling names. The National Guard fired back in response, and the scene deteriorated into complete confusion and violence. The aftermath was less than a noble peasant revolt. The *curé* Cantiteau of Pin-et-Mauges, a stout supporter of Cathelineau the rebel chief, recounts the event as “nothing more than a simple revolt with pillage.” Drunkenness reigned over the young men as they gorged themselves on vandalism and the theft of *assignats*.⁹⁶

Similar riots erupted elsewhere, sometimes independently, sometimes on the arrival of armed peasants and warchiefs from other areas. One particularly deserving of mention is the riot and massacres at Machecoul, a favorite of Republican polemicists and a stain for Royalists. Beginning also on 12 March, it opened when a swarm of peasants descended on the city. A Republican official attempted to calm the crowd, promising concessions in return for the safety of the populace. The crowd exploded when a rioter, one Maupassant, stabbed the official to death. The situation rapidly deteriorated into slaughter as long resentful peasants and poor artisans now vented their anger on the Republicans. At Machecoul, the rioters devised the “chapelets,” Republicans tied in two and shot to death at the edge of mass graves.⁹⁷

Further description of the violence does not serve the purpose of this thesis. Nevertheless, even this overview makes clear the sheer difference in scale of this uprising from any previous

⁹⁵ Ross, *Banners*, 61-62.

⁹⁶ M. L. Sicotière, *Le Curé Cantiteau: Notes sur les Cathelineau* (Angers: de Germain et G. Grassin, 1877), 15.

⁹⁷ Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 690-92. A more grotesque and graphic account is provided by Michelet, who delights in recounting in great detail the infamies of the Royalists. Needless to say, he overshot his mark by quite a bit. Michelet, *Histoire*, tome II vol. I, 268-69.

riots, including the 24 August 1792 uprising at Bressuire. This, then, marks the beginning of the uprising. As the drunken and enraged haze began to lift, the peasants who had participated began to realize the possible repercussions of their actions. As soon as this was the case, they sought leadership that might salvage the situation. Across the region the peasants looked to the nobility for leadership. Much to the chagrin of Republican advocates, the nobility seems to have been both surprised and substantially displeased with this decision. This directly contradicts the Republican narrative of nobles happily fomenting rebelliousness and disaffection amongst their peasants. François-Athanase Charette was found gallantly hiding underneath his bed.⁹⁸ The Marquis de Bouère insisted that the whole effort was one of “a clay pot against an iron pot.”⁹⁹ Bonchamps suggested that the people go home, but instead was browbeat by the crowd into leading them to the point that he was forced to ride a horse rather than walk besides the peasants, which he preferred.¹⁰⁰ In fact, of the major noble leaders of the revolt, only the enthusiastic Henri de Rochejaquelein seems to have joined on his own accord.¹⁰¹ It was emphatically *not* a noble uprising.

Due mainly to Republican incompetence, the period from April to July 1793 was one of victories for the loosely confederate Catholic and Royal Army of the Vendée. Any attempt to convey the military aspect of the period in short order would immediately founder on confusion. Charette wandered uninhibited in the marais, while Angevin and Poitavian chiefs like Bonchamps, Sapinaud, d’Elbee and Bouère variously did nothing then lashed forth in bursts against the Republican cities that formed the perimeter of the *Vendée Militaire*, often winning towns quite easily then abandoning them. For the purpose of this thesis, the battles themselves

⁹⁸ Anne Bernet, *Charette* (Paris: Perrin, 2005), 72-73.

⁹⁹ Bouère, *Mémoires*, 14.

¹⁰⁰ Bonchamps, *Mémoires*, 24.

¹⁰¹ Henri was brother to Louis, the future husband to the Marquise de la Rochejaquelein, previously married to Louis de Salgues de Lecure.

are far less interesting than the reason they could not retain the cities. In short, the peasants left. Peter Paret's short but extremely well written operational history of this period shows the extreme fluctuation between an army of 10,000 and army of 2,000.¹⁰² Moreover, the peasants were not loyal to an "army," but to their warchiefs, none of whom excelled at cooperation. Nominal leadership was placed in the hands of the wagonner Jacques Cathelineau, but even then all decisions were made in a council of war. In other words, it was a popular and, effectively, a democratic rebellion. After Cathelineau died after the Battle of Nantes in July, command passed first to d'Elbee, and upon his death to Rochejaquelin.¹⁰³

Just as the military history belies the lack of a cohesive strategic program, the Vendéen attempts to organize politically met even greater indifference. On 26 May 1793, the Vendéen chiefs created a Superior Council to parallel the Military Council, based in Chatillon. Composed of clergy and notables, it represented an ultra-conservative revival, not a body of popular representation. It was basically ignored. In an attempt to accrue some real power it sought to control the monetary system of the conquered territory by issuing Royal *Assignats*. Incredulous peasants wisely deferred.¹⁰⁴ The explanation, according to Alain Gerard, is simple and convincing: "The failure of the Council forces the question of why political life seemed to be impossible in the Vendée...because the Council merely federated regions and social groups that shared only an initial exasperation, then the need to face a pitiless repression."¹⁰⁵ Nothing says in fewer words a deeper truth about the conflict.

¹⁰² Peter Paret, *Internal War and Pacification: The Vendée, 1789-1796* (Princeton: Center of International Studies, 1961). Paret has written the best general overview in terms of numbers. De Malleray is more comprehensive, but also harder to follow.

¹⁰³ Cathelineau died on 14 July 1793, d'Elbée on 6 January 1794, but he had left the army before the *Virée de la Galerne*.

¹⁰⁴ Gerard, 192.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

While the rebels foundered in their attempts to organize, the Republicans sought some kind of position in terms of understanding and response. The wisdom of clerical issues had been lost with the National Assembly, the Legislative Assembly was gone, and a supremely preoccupied National Convention now faced an uprising of unknown proportions on the coasts of the nation, a perfect target for Great Britain, against which France had declared war in February of that year.

The Republican response has to be analyzed on two levels. On the spot, the central Representatives on Mission leaped to action and tried to neutralize the uprising as best they could. Representatives on Mission worked from Nantes to quell the revolt and maintain order among the few troops that were available to them. On 2 April they were already issuing directives against pillage, and on 29 April they issued a declaration giving men over the age of fourteen twenty-four hours to return to work or they would be treated as brigands.¹⁰⁶ The military response was as confused and inept as the rebel attempt was scattered and unsupported. Within twelve months, command changed hands seven times as Republican generals cycled through command of the armies; multiple attempts were made to send columns into the rebel held-territory, but no clear response was articulated.¹⁰⁷ By the summer, the Republican reaction grew more violent. A 20 August 1793 declaration clearly states that anyone attempting to cross to the southern shore of the Loire – presumably in support of the rebels - without authorization would be executed and their property confiscated.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Proclamations of 2 and 29 August, *Archives Departmental de Loire-Atlantique*, L. 96.

¹⁰⁷ Jean-Francois Berruyer (March-April 1793), Leygonnier (April-May 1793), Armand Louise de Gontaut-Biron (May-July 1793), Jean-Antoine Rossingol (July-September 1793), Jean Léchelle (October-November 1793), - Rossingol (November-December 1793), Louis Marie Turreau (December 1793-May 1794). This official list does not include the impact of shadow commanders in the periods of particularly incompetent generals, or the general reorganization of the army late in 1793. The fine work of Henri de Malleray, *Les Cinq Vendées* (Paris: Plon, 1924), is indispensable to a thorough and organized reconstruction of the operational history of the Vendée.

¹⁰⁸ Proclamation, *ADLA*, L. 97.

The ability to respond rested primarily on the support and leadership that the central government could provide. After the Representatives on Mission already present, its first offering was a pair of radicals, Antoine-François Momoro and Charles Philippe Ronsin. While Ronsin occupied himself with annoying every professional soldier in the region, Momoro prepared a report on the nature of the uprising. His interpretation was telling. The people had risen to defend their religion, but had been tricked by the nobles. The latter claimed that they wanted to be equals, and thereby gained the support of the simple peasants who could then be used as pawns.¹⁰⁹ Now that the people were in a state of revolt, the time had come to finally smash the rebellion. In this effort, he suggested, “[we] must close our hearts to pity....It must be that a shocked Europe says of us: ‘Liberty is such a great thing that France, to establish and defend it, overthrew the throne, burned many of its most beautiful cities, killed a part of its people, and at the same time fought against the coalition’.”¹¹⁰ In this response, it is absolutely clear that the popular nature of the revolt was either masked or missed altogether. The advised retaliation suggests faith in a weapon of choice for frustrated revolutionaries: blunt force.

Momoro’s suggestion was seconded by Bertrand Barère’s speech at the Convention on 1 August 1793. Barère’s speech will be discussed at greater length in chapter four. For the time being, it is enough to say that the rhetoric had retrenched and intensified. Moreover, it now found tangible expression in force. Two arrivals that summer changed the nature of the war. The first was the posting of François-Joseph Westermann and his Legion of the North to the Vendée in mid-summer. This unit is infamous for the sheer amount of atrocities that it inflicted on the people of the Vendée, and he is the general oft quoted as saying: “There is no more Vendée, citizens, it has died under our free sword, with its women and children....I have crushed children

¹⁰⁹ A. F. Momoro, *Rapport sur l’Etat Politique de la Vendée* (Paris: Ballard, 1793), 4-5.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

under the hooves of horses, and massacred women who, these at least, will give birth to no more brigands. I do not have a single prisoner with which to reproach myself. I have exterminated everyone.”¹¹¹ His role unquestionably intensified the level of reciprocal fighting in the Vendée. The second critical arrival was of the Mayençaise, a regular regiment commanded by one of its subordinate officers, Jean-Baptiste Kléber. The unit had learned the art of *petite guerre* while besieged at Mayence. Kléber showed himself an enthusiastic and aggressive commander by frequently taking his men on small raids to prevent boredom and to facilitate their training.¹¹² He unquestionably raised the level of professionalism in the region and the unit’s arrival in September clearly marks the final push into the rebel held-territory.

The increasingly beleaguered rebel forces were finally pushed out of the region in October 1793 after the Battle of Cholet. Crossing the Loire at Saint-Florent-le-Vieil, they began a trek to the Republican-held port of Granville in an attempt to receive supplies from England. Harried the whole way to the port by following Republican columns, the siege of the port failed and the army was forced to attempt a return to the Vendée. It was during this return trip that the rebel army was decisively beaten north and west of Nantes at the twin battles of Le Mans and Savenay. It is almost universally accepted that pacification at this point would have been easy had a gentle hand been used. Instead, Turreau received command of the army implemented his Infernal Columns. These will be discussed in chapter four, but for now it needs to be mentioned that these perpetrated the highest level of brutality during the entire war, and are without question its most controversial aspect. Only after the frank failure of the policy was Turreau recalled, and a more conciliatory policy enacted post-Thermidor under General Lazare Hoche, at which point the conflict finally began to subside.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Bell, *The First Total War*, 173.

¹¹² Jean-Joël Brégeon, *Kléber* (Paris: Perrin, 2007), 58-62.

The rising in the Vendée was, above all else, a peasant rebellion. Its grievances, its primary actors, its supporters were peasants. When the rebellion did finally begin, it was peasants that demanded noble leadership. Religious reform did antagonize the locals, but this should only be considered a factor. An increased financial burden, local class and urban-rural antagonisms, and finally the conscription law should be given comparable weight. Chapter three will argue that religion has been attributed with disproportional causality because its symbolism was the most visible. It will also argue that rural collective action was determined to be associated with the Church. This institution was by far their most powerful institution and means of resistance.

For now, it is important to simply recognize the other factors at play, and that the peasant had multiple strong reasons to protest. Moreover, it is critical to note that these factors directly impacted the physical welfare of the peasants. Taxes depleted their already scarce resources. The reform of the Church disturbed their traditional social network, one that reinforced certain values and norms that stabilized their lives. Conscription depleted precious manpower necessary to agriculture. Moreover, they faced an apparently callous enemy in the form of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie already constituted an economically antagonistic force associated with the market. Furthermore, by removing the peasant's clergy, closing their shrines, and dominating the National Guard units in the region, the bourgeoisie appeared to be a perpetual threat to the welfare and stability of the peasant's socio-economic systems.

For the people of western France, the Revolution did not constitute an idealistic overthrow of archaic ideas that bounded the market or limited a rising bourgeoisie. For them, it was an unknown, a possibility that could constitute a welcome reform or a dangerous innovation. This perspective on the priorities of the two parties is perhaps the best indication of the sheer level of disconnect. The revolutionaries believed that citizenship and nationhood were supreme

ideals immediately worthy of sacrifice. Theirs was a long-term perspective on nationhood and growth that valued sacrifice to abstract notions of the whole. The peasant was pre-eminently concerned with survival based on local economies and socio-political structures. In other words, the peasants and the revolutionaries were looking at the same events but were deriving entirely different conclusions. The revolutionaries saw the birth of a new, national utopia, the health of which was threatened by reaction. Therefore, *lèse-nation* was a real and dangerous threat. The peasants saw change that threatened their immediate safety, and perceived it as an equally real threat.

CHAPTER 4

RELIGION AND THE VENDÉE

The historiographical debate on the Vendée has often centered around religion. Moderates like Lequinio readily accepted the explanation of fanatical priests angrily stirring up seditious thoughts among the people.¹¹³ This stereotype has persisted. For example, Alphonse Aulard chose to refer to the rebel army's title (Royal and Catholic) rather than the chronology of the uprising to determine its cause. He quickly acknowledges the Levy of 300,000, but frames the issue as thoroughly religious.¹¹⁴ On the surface, Vendéen behavior seems to confirm this picture. Distinguished by the ubiquitous *sacre-coeur*, they religiously carried their *chapelets* and made frequent pilgrimages. The story of the wars are replete with religious reference. These will be discussed later in the chapter, but it seems necessary to put these events in the context of a broader psychological universe.

Living as we do in a highly secular society, it is often difficult to grasp the importance of an institution like the Catholic Church. We are exhorted to “try to imagine” how important such an institution might have been to those living at the time. It bears mentioning, however, that true understanding must come strikingly close to empathy, and empathy can only arise with a holistic appreciation of the designated group and/or individual. Thus, to say that the Vendéens were “highly religious” is, at best, a limited, and perhaps even a limiting description.

It is best to begin with the foundational elements of the power of Catholicism, indeed religion in general, in rural Europe. The Catholic Church in rural France was considered legitimate. It intersected with the individual peasant in both material and spiritual terms. However, it should not be considered an all-powerful oligarchy leading the stupid rural masses.

¹¹³ Lequinio, *Guerres*, 10.

¹¹⁴ Alphonse Aulard, *Christianity and the French Revolution*, trans. Lady Frazer (New York: Howard Fertig, 1966), 97.

The peasants may have flocked to the table, but not always for the same reasons that the priests were welcoming them. Religion appeared to give the peasants what they wanted.

The fact of the matter is that the Church fit into what Charles Taylor refers to as the “enchanted universe.” This strikes at the very core of existence and stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from our contemporary western understanding of the world based on science and the faults of perception. Modern theories of epistemology emphasize perception. We see and interpret external stimuli and construct a unique reality within ourselves, one that does not necessarily relate accurately to an external reality, should one even exist. Thus, we have developed scientific means of increasing our sensory abilities, thereby ameliorating our view of this external reality. Despite these advances, the idea of a universal “truth” or “reality” remains elusive, and the degree to which we identify something as true or real remains a matter of perception. Be that as it may, we also accept that natural laws govern the external reality. Furthermore, it possesses a real and meaningful set of patterns that, if understood, allow prediction.

In the early modern enchanted world, an external meaning and truth could act on us, such that “we can say that in the enchanted world, charged things have a causal power which matches their incorporated meaning.”¹¹⁵ The best example of this is possession by demons, but might encompass witches, curses and potions, not least of which might include the Eucharist. Nor was this a superficial belief. Even during the First World War, a Vendéen peasant in the army tried to convince comrades that his father had seen a shape shifter, to which they responded with disbelief, as it was *very* well known that one had not been seen for years.¹¹⁶ These forces defy clear understanding. They remain mysterious, and must be consulted as much as they are studied.

¹¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard, 2007), 35.

¹¹⁶ Weber, *Peasants*, 25.

A force like a rainstorm ceases, therefore, to be a matter of wind, temperature, pressure and humidity levels, and becomes one of good or evil spirits, saints, and even God and Satan. The idea that a thinking, personalized supernatural force was the root cause of such behavior was widely accepted by the rural population of early modern France. The Church claimed the position as the most compelling explanation of and resource for intercession in the course of these events. Thus, when suffering from infertility, a toothache, or even bad gas, prayer served just as effectively for physical ailments as for spiritual ails.¹¹⁷ Similarly, storms could be diverted by ringing Church bells. While this practice was not usually condoned by priests and officials, nineteenth century norms required it; denying the peasantry risked social standing and physical well being.¹¹⁸

This perspective demands a certain spiritual utilitarianism. Why defend the Church? Rather for the same reason that one changes the car oil, air filters, light bulbs in the closet and performs routine maintenance on water pipes. The physical world simply works better when the supernatural forces of the world are on your side. It was similarly useful to ensure a child's soul, a matter so important that a midwife could perform it by blowing water into the birth canal.¹¹⁹ John McManners frames the issue as follows:

This was a social order in which anarchy was kept at bay because certain things were always done in certain ways and certain patterns of deference were always observed. The way to live was to conform to established wisdom. The question of belief as outright conviction is hardly relevant in the context...real hope and yearning, trying everything just in case something worked, performing ritual

¹¹⁷ Alison Rowlands, "The Conditions of Life for the Masses," in *Early Modern Europe: An Oxford History*, ed. Euan Cameron (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 41-2.

¹¹⁸ Weber, *Peasants*, 29.

¹¹⁹ John McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth Century France: Volume Two, The Religion of the People and the Politics of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 3.

actions to occupy the mind, making an outward gesture in communion with other people [were all possible].¹²⁰

But the Church also served the community in more concrete and tangible ways. The *curé* (or *vicaire*) of the local parish was by far the most educated person in the area. He presented all government decrees and oversaw basic education. If a hospital was located in the area, it was most likely operated by a religious order. So too, birth, death, baptismal and marriage records were regularly the domain of the parish clergy.¹²¹ More importantly, the Church, run by the *curé*, was the focal point of local government. The *fabrique* was the council that oversaw the material assets of the Church. This council, however, readily crossed the line between Church and municipal business, and represented a powerful political force in the village. The church was, in fact, the only place where the people of the village routinely assembled and intermingled.¹²² The *curé* was also one of the few leaders who could genuinely mobilize and guide the people. Thus, at Mouilleron in December 1789, the *curé* Guinefolleau was convinced to lead the people in requisitioning grain from suspected hoarders.¹²³

The critical change that understanding the enchanted worldview makes is that it weakens the idea that the peasants of the Vendée were defending some kind of simple rural morality, a mere conservative values system. This severely understates the situation. Defending Catholicism meant defending an entire worldview, a spiritual, “enchanted” understanding of the world and the mechanisms used to control it. The non-juring clergy used this belief-system to attack the juring clergy, claiming that their separation from Rome compromised their efficacy. As one pamphlet said, “[w]homsoever separates himself from the Church to join an adulterous society is

¹²⁰ Ibid., 210.

¹²¹ Goubert, *Peasants*, 155-56.

¹²² Ibid., 151-52.

¹²³ Gérard, *Vendée*, 24.

excluded from the promises made by the Church. Those who abandon the Church of Christ will not share in the recompense of Jesus: those will be strangers, profane, enemies. Those who no longer have the Church for a mother will no longer have God as a father.”¹²⁴ Schism threatened not only theology, but the safety of one’s soul and worldly welfare. The claim was even made that confessing to a juring priest was worse than not confessing at all.¹²⁵ Thus, the gusto with which the people in the *bocage* rejected the juring clergy is far more understandable. In protecting the clergy, they protected a whole way of life. Beyond that, some of the actions of the rioters seem less explicitly moralistic in this context and more utilitarian.

In April and May 1791, riots erupted in Saint-Jean-de-Monts, Apremont, and Saint-Christoph-de-Lignerion, all in the district of Challans. All were in response to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. In the town of Saint-Jean-de-Monts, the rioting seems to have been led by a rather eccentric figure by the name of André Dupont. Claiming that he had 3,000 men willing to kill all bourgeoisies (except for the young, so that humanity as a species might be preserved), he promptly led an attack on the pews of the parish. Notably, Dupont’s message included no overt religious angle as it was recounted by witnesses. Instead, he was preaching an economic message, which was then expressed by an act of vandalism in the Church. The religious overtones for communal resistance were provided by the *curé* Morand, who gave the usual explanation that confession from a juring priest was pointless, but he does not seem to have talked with Dupont.¹²⁶

In Apremont, the anger was more directly related to the attempts to remove the local non-juring *curé*, but the anger was vented in much the same way. After the juring clergyman and

¹²⁴ *L’Instruction Pastorale de M. L’Évêque de Boulogne* (Paris : Guerbart, 1791), 5-6.

¹²⁵ Deposition de Geneviève Bret, Interrogatoire de Curé de Saint Jean de Monts, in Chassin, *Préparation*, 1: 246, 249.

¹²⁶ Deposition de Geneviève Bret, Marie-Elisabeth Mourain, Jacques Arnot, Pierre-Louis la Roche and Interrogatoire du Curé de Saint Jean de Monts, in *ibid.*, 1: 246-50.

several revolutionary leaders escaped an angry mob, it fell on the pews in the Church, sparing only those of the nobles. After a period of respite and apparently for want of any idea for what to do next, they returned and splintered the few remaining bits of the pews they had already assaulted.¹²⁷ The splinters were then transferred to the cemetery where they were burned.¹²⁸

Local guards were promptly organized to protect the *curé*, François Riout.¹²⁹ Riout later claimed that the local bourgeoisie were anxious to take his life, the motivation for which he could only suggest to be their anger at his qualification of his oath. He promptly disavowed any connection to the mob itself on the day that the pews were destroyed, ingloriously claiming that his policy in the face of danger was always to flee.¹³⁰ Although accompanied by some stone throwing, the violence seems to have been basically subdued.

The pews of the bourgeoisies at Saint-Christoph-de-Lignerion were similarly destroyed, albeit with more violence in general. The breaking of the pews, then, was a symbolic act against a class associated, most likely, with exploitation. Because the Church was the symbolic center of the town and the community, any act in it constituted a public declaration. Alain Gérard cites this as evidence for the conflict between bourgeois and peasant interests in the Vendée. “[T]he breaking of the pews does not lend itself to confusion. The community intended to expel the bourgeois patriots that had infringed on the tacit rules of their solidarity.”¹³¹ Even if the peasants possessed no such uniform program, they did share a uniform means of conveying their distaste, however vague it might be, and it centered on the most public place in the village.

Above all, the story of the breaking of the pews must guide us away from generalization.

As with all riots, any number of motives might have been at play, from attempts to oust the

¹²⁷ Procès-Verbal Adressé au District de Challans par le Commandant et les Officiers de la Garde Nationale d’Apremont, in *ibid.*, 1:254.

¹²⁸ Déposition de Joseph-Gilbert Grolleau, in *ibid.*, 1:256.

¹²⁹ Déposition de Thérèse Guyet, in *ibid.*, 1 :259.

¹³⁰ Interrogatoire de Riout, ci-devant Curé d’Apremont, in *ibid.*, 1:264.

¹³¹ Gérard, *Vendée*, 32.

bourgeoisie in millenarian zeal to simple preference for and attachment to the local *curé*. This same variety of motive must be applied to all other areas as well, including the ever present *sacre-coeur* of the peasants, as much magic as religious symbolism. So too, Gérard suggests a great misunderstanding of the pilgrimages that marked the rural response around Cholet. Deprived of their priests, the people went on pilgrimages, seeking the intercession of the Virgin Mary in their confused and shaken circumstances. The Revolutionary authorities, assuming that they were armed, routinely confiscated idols, broke up pilgrimages and closed shrines. These were ignorant and blunt acts, unnecessary antagonism of confused people turning to an old practice that was otherwise ignored, used at this moment like an emergency blanket housed in a glass casing unopened for decades.¹³²

The war itself would provide numerous apocryphal or embellished stories suggesting deep spirituality. During the 11 April 1793 battle for Chemillé, d'Elbée is said to have protected Republican prisoners from slaughter by intervening and ordering the Vendéen rebels to say their *pater noster*. Upon reaching the line "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin upon us," Elbée stopped his men and told them to follow God's word. The other great episode of Christian virtue is the pardon of Bonchamps. While crossing the Loire on 18 October 1793, the rebels had several thousand Republican prisoners. Uncertain about what to do, the decision was made to execute them. When the wounded Bonchamps heard of this, he ordered that they be released, and rebel soldiers ran crying "Pardonnez! Bonchamps l'ordonne!" The Marquise de Bonchamps refers to the Christian nature of the Vendéens repeatedly throughout her work.¹³³

What all of these stories convey, even if they are exaggerations, is that Christianity was a real part of the rebel world, that it did heavily influence many of their responses. But a world of

¹³² Ibid., 41-2.

¹³³ Bonchamps, *Mémoires*, 51.

difference exists between using a certain worldview to interpret an event, and defending that worldview itself. Yes, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy saw widespread unrest, but not rebellion, just riot. The idea of religious war, even one fought to save the local clergy, is bogus. The common revolutionary statement that the people were stirred up by the clergy might very well hold some truth, but that does not even approach the idea that the people really fought for the Church. In truth, the emphasis on the religious trappings of the movement probably has much more to do with memory than with experience. The emphasis on religious inclination and motive appears to have been emphasized after the war. In the words of Jean-Clément Martin, “the Vendée finally constituted a ‘memory-region’ that symbolized moral and religious resistance to modernist and revolutionary forces.”¹³⁴ In short, the Vendéens probably did not fight for religion, but invoked religion in their fight.

The next question is how their Republican contemporaries perceived Vendéen motivation. The radical revolutionaries were never well disposed toward the priests and the Catholic establishment in France. One must only recall the moderate voices of Gallois and Gensonné proclaiming that “the unlimited confidence that [the countryfolk] give to their priest are [along with antiquated religion] the principal causes of the troubles in the region.”¹³⁵ Frankly, the governments of the Revolution responded with sometimes alarming indifference and tactlessness to the religious preoccupations of the people. However, the road from tactless indifference to outright rhetorical hatred and disregard took several years to mature. It is fair to say that religion was the central focus of the Revolutionaries in the war. Therefore, tracing the official attitude toward religion does much to gauge the relationship between the two groups.

¹³⁴ Jean-Clément Martin, *La Vendée et la Révolution* (Paris: Perrin, 2007), 158.

¹³⁵ Rapport de Gallois et Gensonné, in Madival and Laurent, *Archives Parlementaires*, 142.

The whole issue is complicated by the fact that religious reform in France between 1789 and 1792 was not a coherent or singular issue. Rather, it went through several stages of intensification. At first, reform reflected merely the destruction of perceived abuses of the Church, including multiple benefices, absentee bishops and the tithe.¹³⁶ Nevertheless, the mood was not one of anti-clericalism *per se*. Certainly the contemplative orders were excoriated by many levels of society. This could be founded in resentment of their wealth or disagreement with the principal assumptions of the occupation.¹³⁷ Either way, the hope for reform was healthy and alive throughout French society.

The question quickly transmuted into one of authority, nowhere more notably than during the night of 4-5 August with the abolition of feudalism. This was promptly underscored by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, which in Article 3 declares that all sovereignty resides in the nation. Michael P. Fitzsimmons has eloquently defended the idea that the men who renounced the privileges of their orders that night were committed to the principals of a more egalitarian society.¹³⁸ As such, no order could stand apart from the uniform and enlightened purview of law, be it a guild, the nobility or the Church. This was no legal nicety. The entirety of the Gallican Church was based on a fierce independence, an independence that was perceived as a constitutional threat by many members of the National Assembly. The appropriation of Church lands in late 1789 was more than attempt to pay the national debt. It was also an attempt to dominate the loyalty of the clergy by depriving it of an independent source of revenue.¹³⁹

Nevertheless, for the time being, most clergymen were still willing to support the Revolution. Few people note with any great concern the abolition of vows or the contemplative

¹³⁶ Jean de Viguier, *Christianisme et Révolution : Cinq Leçons d'Histoire de la Révolution Française* (Paris : Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1986), 47-48.

¹³⁷ McManners, *The French Revolution*, 8-10.

¹³⁸ Michael P. Fitzsimmons, *The Night the Old Regime Ended: August 4, 1789, and the French Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1998).

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

orders. The inevitable confrontation came with the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in July 1790. Having deprived the Church of its means of support (primarily its lands and the tithe), abolished Catholicism as the official religion of the state, but unwilling to entirely divorce itself from the Catholic Church, the National Assembly passed the CCC to simultaneously reform and affirm its support for the Church. For the most part, this document would have been welcome to many clergymen and laymen alike. It reformed numerous abuses as they were seen in the cahiers, and was actually a fair reform. Among other reforms, it finally lent some equity to the pay scale, drastically reducing the differences in wealth between the upper and lower clergy.

Thus, the clergy should have been happy, were it not for several egregious affronts to the solidarity of the Church. The three most spectacular were the means of selecting *curés* and bishops, the oath to the state and the transformation of the relationship between the Church and Rome. The election of *curés* and bishops was highly unpalatable to many on the grounds that Protestants, Jews and even secularists could vote, thereby risking the character of the Church. That was quickly contested by defenders of the Constitution who reminded clerics of the less than holy means of selection under the Old Regime, rife with corruption and favoritism. Despite objections, it was one of the less palatable sections that could nevertheless be tolerated.

The other two were simply intolerable for many, and both were related to the question of authority. The oath was a simple civic oath, not at all unlike oaths taken by other civil servants. For a cleric, however, authority came from Rome. But it was more than authority, because it also related to efficacy. One must only recall the claims of the refractory clergy that confessing to a juring priest was worse than not confessing at all. At the core of this issue was the CCC's contention that the Pope was only the figure head of the Church on earth, not the real and empowered director thereof. To the constitutionally minded representative, this made

consummate sense and was perfectly in accord with law. To the clergyman, and to those who listened to him every Sunday, it represented a dangerous breach with the efficacy of the whole Catholic Church.

Even then, only one obstacle really stood in the way: the Pope's approval. At the very least, the National Assembly needed to consult Pope Pius VI. Even if it had, it would have met a rebuff from the pontiff. On 9 July 1790 in secret correspondence, Pius declared that Louis XVI would lead his entire nation into Godlessness if he accepted the CCC.¹⁴⁰ An equally unhappy Louis received the news too late to resist and signed the motion into law. For the moment, however, the Pope's position was unknown and the clergy waited uncomfortably, trying in a myriad of ways to avoid the oath, which perhaps 50% of the clergy in France swore, and even then many took it with unofficial reservations. In the eyes of many, the greatest crime of the CCC was that it was not the result of consultation with the Pope.

This requires some explanation. As far as the members of the National Assembly were concerned, their position as national representatives gave them the greater power in the land. Moreover, given the precedent of absolutist monarchs such as Louis XIV, they did not perceive the abrogation of Rome's powers as any great novelty in European history.¹⁴¹ It may also have resulted from a certain amount of hubris. The National Assembly had grown accustomed to clerical support for its more radical measures, and after the relatively quiet acceptance of the appropriation of Church lands, the representatives may well have expected little resistance to this new, albeit far more radical move.¹⁴² Therefore, when the Pope openly condemned the CCC in March and April 1791, the National Assembly was thoroughly shocked. The clergy responded

¹⁴⁰ Viguierie, *Christianisme*, 82.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴² McManners, *Church*, 46.

with numerous retractions of the oath.¹⁴³ Under the Legislative Assembly, matters grew worse still. The great crisis of war bred a fierce intolerance as desperate legislators began to lash out at all who threatened solidarity. The refractory priest posed the same threat as a spy, a moderate or an Austrian.

The crisis of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy was fundamentally an issue of legitimacy. All peoples and nations derive stability from assumptions, from the belief that a particular institution represents their values and acts as their best arbiter. The story of the French Revolution is one of the complete disintegration of these beliefs in the face of unrelenting change. Perhaps a compromise might have been reached had the challenges created by the Constitution been given time to work themselves out, but under the circumstances the matter of legitimate authority dug too deep to be passed over easily. A question of authority quickly became a question of political orthodoxy and fealty, and war and the Terror quickly turned even that debate into a Manichaean battle.

But not all at once. The religious situation changed drastically in 1791 with the election of the Legislative Assembly: a new group of men unfamiliar with the subtleties of religious policies, untried in national government and utterly lacking their predecessors' abilities for political compromise. This was unfortunate, as they were facing a heated conflict. In January 1791, the National Assembly had complicated the implementation of the Constitution by making its enforcement a matter of local concern, thereby subjecting the situation to the caprices of local rivalries and security concerns.¹⁴⁴ In fact, for some time the local policies of administrators in the west far surpassed in severity any directive from Paris, and it would be 1792 before persecution saw some kind of uniformity on the local and national levels. An accurate assessment of this

¹⁴³ Ibid., 59.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 61.

requires a step back and the ability to see the cracks in the façade. However harsh the decrees of the government might appear, the constitutional historian Michel Troper reminds us that no law represents complete unanimity.¹⁴⁵

The disconnect is most apparent in official attitudes after the deadline for the oath. Throughout the spring and summer of 1791, official decrees were issued encouraging tolerance for non-juring priests. In April and May, laws were passed allowing them free practice of the mass in rented buildings, including constitutional cathedrals.¹⁴⁶ This attempt at tolerance was quickly overpowered by local affairs as local patriots clamped down on non-juring clergy, including measures taken by the government of Maine-et-Loire imprisoning non-juring priests in Angers. Not incidentally, this law was illegal because it contradicted national law.

Some of the most reliable religious historians of the Revolution and the Church, including Aulard and McManners, reduce the debates in the Legislative Assembly to uniform opinion. Though not spiteful, the national government passed laws reforming the Church that bowled over popular and religious opinion, and sped remorselessly toward renovation. In this area, scholars of religion, the French Revolution and the Vendée in particular are highly indebted to Marie Breguet, whose work, *L'Avant Guerre de Vendée: Les Questions Religieuses à l'Assemblée Législative*, casts the debate over the religious issue in a completely new light.

In one sense, Breguet opens with conventional opinion. The report of Gallois and Gensonné is cast as basically moderate, even if it snubbed local religion. So too, she shares stories of radicals like Jean-François Goupilleau, who suggested that bishops could be consecrated in Jewish Synagogues and Protestant Churches.¹⁴⁷ Nevertheless, she presents a very

¹⁴⁵ Michel Troper, *Terminer la Révolution: La Constitution de 1795* (Paris: Fayard, 2006), 18.

¹⁴⁶ McManner, *Church*, 61.

¹⁴⁷ Marie Breguet, *L'Avant guerre de Vendée: Les Questions Religieuses à l'Assemblée Législative* (Paris: Pierre Téqui, 2004), 36.

different debate over religious issues in the turbulent aftermath of the CCC. Slightly over a year after the initial legislation, the newly minted Legislative Assembly was facing a clerical crisis in the provinces. The report of Gallois and Gensonné on 9 October 1791 excited a vigorous round of debates between moderates and radicals. For every Goupilleau that was in the audience, an equal number of moderates continued to demand tolerance for non-juring priests.¹⁴⁸ More importantly, they did so by drawing a careful distinction between religious and political loyalty. As late as October 1791, moderates were desperately attempting to require a new oath to avoid mass deportations.¹⁴⁹ The moderates were ultimately subsumed by the radicals. This is not surprising. The fight against the king and the march to war undermined attempts at moderatism. The October-November debates on refractory clergy had, ominously, been accompanied by debates on the émigrés. It was, in other words, the process of overgeneralization and polarization that destroyed political compromise and ultimately the last chance for national religious reconciliation. But again, it was not because the Legislative Assembly or the National Convention were overly concerned with religion per se. Non-juring priests were on par with émigrés and Austrians; all were assumed to be part of a conspiracy to undermine the Revolutionary achievement.¹⁵⁰

As a final note, Alphonse Aulard's comment bears mention. "Of all the events that wrought the frame of mind which resulted in the attempt to dethrone Christianity, the insurrection of La Vendée, by its clerical form, was the chief, the most influential."¹⁵¹ This ties into Martin's comment cited earlier that the Vendée became the field of ideological debate during and after the Revolution, but was certainly oversimplified and stereotyped by authors in

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 82-83.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 104.

¹⁵⁰ Sylvia Neely, *A Concise History of the French Revolution* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 140-41.

¹⁵¹ Aulard, *Christianity*, 98.

both the Royalist and republican schools for generations. It is amply clear, however, that this post-conflict distillation of the issue into one of Catholicism and traditionalism versus Republicanism in no way accurately represents the role of religion in the conflict. For Republicans and Rebels alike, religion was a central, but not a defining issue - a symptom and characteristic of a greater legitimacy crisis that has been mistaken for the disease.

Above all else, the conflation of the religious issue with the nature of the conflict conceals the real lessons of history. In Viet Nam, the United States confused Ho Chi Minh with a committed international communist. Complex local issues are routinely completely distorted by outsiders who are eager to find an easy label and a quick fix to a perceived problem. Beneath obvious titles, timeless and powerful social forces for order, stability and safety were at work in the Vendée, and were threatened by the reforms of the Revolution. The Church was a part of this structure, an integral part, and it deserves serious attention as part of the conflict. So too, as the Revolution radicalized, its newer ideals were in conflict with traditional religious ideas. Nonetheless, the main issue was still loyalty to the new Revolutionary state, not an overhaul of the spirits of the French people. Oversimplification, which turns systems and questions of legitimacy into a religious crusade, totally mischaracterizes the conflict.

CHAPTER 5

TURREAU'S COLUMNS

To date, two basic schools have dominated research on the violence in the Vendée. The first is that of social and political historians. In attempting to dissect the brutality in the Vendée between 1793 and 1795, they have often resorted to an argument based primarily on Republican ideology. With some variations, the argument focuses on two points. First, in 1793 Republican policy shifted from attempts to convert enemies of the Revolution to attempts to annihilate them, an idea that can be called exterminatory warfare. This new policy was motivated in turn by the extreme Manichean rhetoric that underlay the Terror and contributed to the brutality of the government response in the Vendée.¹⁵² On other occasions, in attempting to integrate the Vendée into a larger analytical perspective, they sacrifice a rigorous analysis that explores and accounts for the various contextual factors in the Vendée.¹⁵³ Thus, the actions of Turreau, Westermann and the Committee of Public Safety are, consciously or otherwise, portrayed as a the norm for Republican forces while deviations are presented as anomalies. The other school is that of the military historians. This perspective presents an almost uniformly sterile analysis that focuses on operational affairs and official correspondence without substantial analysis of the events or a meaningful attempt to explain the origins of the brutality.¹⁵⁴ Both present valid arguments and essential elements of the story, but equally so they both lack balance and perspective.

As with the previous chapter on religion, the role of ideas, of ideology, is accepted. Ideology did help shape the programs and language that the Revolutionaries used in this effort. They did help formulate the language and objectives of the pacification program. A less

¹⁵² See, for example, Schama, *Citizens*, 792.

¹⁵³ Bell, *The First Total War*, 175.

¹⁵⁴ For example, André Montagnon, *Les Guerres de Vendée : 1793-1832* (Paris: Perrin, 1974) ; de Malleray, *Les Cinq Vendées*.

ideological program might readily have accepted a compromised peace much earlier.

Nevertheless, ideology must be de-emphasized so that other factors can be considered. In chapter three, the ideology of Catholicism was qualified by its relationship to broader socio-political structures. In this chapter, the violence perpetrated by the march of Turreau's Columns between January and May 1794 will be qualified and explained by contextual factors not directly linked to ideology including indiscipline, desensitization and progressive brutalization. Critically, these forces represent deep-seated human tendencies that do not require a profoundly held ideology to be activated. Given the degree to which Turreau's columns now represent a great ideological reprisal, they are the ideal proving ground for this thesis' assertions.

Few would question the importance of ideology at the highest levels of the Republican government as it sought to cope with the crisis. Regardless of the actual ideological drives and capacities of the Catholic and Royal Army of the Vendée, the insurrection hit a paranoid government at a point of intense internal and external unrest.¹⁵⁵ The same Levy that had sparked the insurrection in the Vendée caused riots elsewhere. The wars on the frontiers went poorly and the government was chronically unstable. Though the Republican government subsequently mischaracterized the Vendéen rebels, it is important to understand exactly what this perception was and how it changed over time. Above all else, it is important to understand that no consistent political consensus ever existed within the governing circles, the Committee of Public Safety and the Representatives-on-Mission, charged with resolving the crisis.

At the highest levels of government, the crisis in the Vendée was immediately marked as the result of a noble and religious plot to defeat the Revolution. While David Bell overburdens his argument with ideology, he is correct in his statement that the climate was rife with

¹⁵⁵ The best analysis of the origins of the rebellion to date is Tilly's *The Vendée*.

ideological assumptions.¹⁵⁶ Alain Gérard explains that “as the Revolution was the incarnation of...progress, it seemed perfectly unthinkable that a part of the people had refused their own happiness....The people, by nature as good here as elsewhere, had been lied to, manipulated by obscure counter-revolutionary forces.”¹⁵⁷ The language used to describe those accused of fomenting rebellion was often abusive and uncompromising. A.F. Momoro’s May 1793 letter to the Committee of Public Safety is a wonderful example. In his report on the political state of the people he claimed that “everywhere the priests, the *ci-devants* are the same, which is to say that they miss the Old Regime and the abuses upon which their existence depended.” As noted, at the end of his report he suggested that the rest of Europe should look upon France with shock at how it willingly burned its own villages and killed its own people to safeguard liberty in language that was almost exterminationist.¹⁵⁸

The reaction to the Vendée was clearly both emotional and ideological insofar as the political directors in Paris interpreted its causality within their own distinct ideological paradigm. The next question is whether or not this ideological background pushed them to advocate any measures that might have been unnecessary to simple pacification. Bell asserts that the impetus for the brutality of the campaign came more from political motive than “military necessity,” while Peter Paret refers to a willingness to extend the campaign beyond its necessary limits for the sake of ideology.¹⁵⁹

This picture of a supremely ideological paradigm can exist only by ignoring repeated attempts by the Republican authorities to end the situation as quickly and practically as possible. As much as the context of the Republic embattled may have intensified the emotional response

¹⁵⁶ Bell, *Total War*, 143.

¹⁵⁷ Alain Gérard, “*Par Principe d’Humanité...*” *La Terreur et la Vendée* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 83.

¹⁵⁸ Momoro, *Rapport*, 34, 36.

¹⁵⁹ Bell, *Total War*, 184; Paret, *Internal War and Pacification*, 55, 60.

to the Vendée, it also presented the necessity to eliminate this threat, one of many, as quickly as possible. Thus, Bertrand Barère's October 1793 address to the Committee of Public Safety explicitly stated that the Vendée must be pacified before the end of the campaigning season.¹⁶⁰ Similarly, Pierre-Anselme Garrau's mission as Representative to the Army of the West was based on the need to end the rebellion quickly in order to free troops for the war against the coalition, a point similarly underlined by Donald Sutherland in his general history of the Revolution.¹⁶¹ The pressure to end the pacification campaign quickly repeatedly appears in Turreau's dispatches where he refers to ending the campaign in fifteen days.¹⁶² Paret's claim that the Republicans were willing to extend the campaign unnecessarily is simply wrong.

Even the appearance of ideological uniformity and universal support for exterminatory warfare can be seriously called into question. Although Representatives Lequinio and Marc-Antoine Jullien ultimately lost the battle with representatives Nicolas Hentz and Marie-Pierre Francastel over the appropriate means of ending the conflict, their vocal and open opposition serves to balance the picture of the Vendée. Both spoke of the inhumanity of the pacification, openly condemning the soldiers of murder, rape and pillage, going so far as to assert that such behavior had rekindled Vendéen resistance.¹⁶³ They suggested instead a regeneration of the populous through patriotic festivals in the hopes that they would "electrify the public spirit." The fact of the matter is that both Lequinio and Jullien were committed Republicans who simply felt that the current campaign was harming rather than facilitating the welfare of the Republic.

¹⁶⁰ Bertrand Barrère, *Rapport sur la Vendée, au Nom de Comité de Salut Public, par Barrère, dans la Séance du premier octobre 1793* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1793), 12.

¹⁶¹ Chassin, *La Vendée Patriote*, 4: 325 ; D.M.G. Sutherland, *The French Revolution and Empire: The Quest for a Civic Order* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 225.

¹⁶² No apparent reason exists for this specific number. See, for example, Turreau to the Committee of Public Safety, 25 January 1794, in Chassin, *Vendée Patriote*, 257.

¹⁶³ Chassin, *Vendée Patriote*, 318-19.

Lequino's history of the war, which appeared in October 1794, raises another issue that shows the diversity and nuance of the political argument over the Vendée. In it he writes of Carrier's generalization that the entire population of the Vendée was made up of brigands. In response he wonders if "one who has only traveled through a small part of the countryside, and whose knowledge is drawn from only one point of the rebellion, can form only one opinion without injustice?"¹⁶⁴ While much is made of the idea that all Vendéens were responsible for the rebellion, in truth a substantial debate may have existed over how to differentiate between the inhabitants of the Vendée. In the popular conceptualization of events, the people were progressively won over by conniving and devious priests and nobles.¹⁶⁵ Throughout the entire period of revolt and pacification, reports refer variously to brigands, priests, cowards, *ci-devants* and many similar names. Below this haphazard array of epithets was the real question of who was to be held responsible and punished.

A decree by the Committee of Public Safety dated 6 February 1794 at the height of the repression makes it very clear that a line was to be drawn between those who had taken arms and those who had not.¹⁶⁶ The clearest definition comes as part of the pre-Thermidorian retreat from Turreau's plan, which was continued briefly after his removal, and is worth quoting in full. "[The columns] will treat as rebels those who possess arms, who do not have a domicile, who are not with their families, who have not attended the communal assemblies and who have not had themselves recorded therein."¹⁶⁷ This broad definition of who exactly constituted the enemy will become problematic in the following discussion of the generals in the Vendée and the actions of

¹⁶⁴ Representative Lequino, *Guerre de la Vendée et des Chouans* (Paris: Pougny, October 1794), 77.

¹⁶⁵ See, for example, Momoro, *Rapport*, 4.

¹⁶⁶ *Décisions du Comité de Salut Public et de la Convention*, 6 February 1794, in Chassin, *Vendée Patriote*, 291. Chassin claims that the original draft of this order was in Carnot's handwriting. If so, it was written by one of the more practical members of the Committee, but I consider this a moot point as it must have met the approval of the entire committee.

¹⁶⁷ Order of 21 May by the Committee of Public Safety, in Chassin, *Vendée Patriote*, 502. The next sentence reads "One will employ force only in the case of necessity."

the soldiers. As the rest of the chapter will show, it was not accepted or followed with any great care.

Overriding these specific issues was the overwhelming concern about the survival of the Republic. While, in reality, the Vendée hardly constituted the gravest threat to the Republic, the mindset of the Revolutionaries forced them to view it as one of the most immediate physical and ideological threats. This survival instinct is in no way unique to Revolutionary governments, but is the kind of reaction that any government would make to what it perceived as the greatest threat to its existence. This natural instinct was no doubt exacerbated by the apocalyptic language of the Revolution. The best way to summarize the political element is to say that a constant tension existed between an ideological and practical response.

This approach is best illustrated by the Committee's choice of Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the West. Every general appointed to that post was chosen because of political loyalty. Bell rightly notes the purposefulness of these decisions, as well as their disastrous impact on the campaign.¹⁶⁸ Generals were selected for their willingness to support the decisions of the Republican government, but it was not simply because the government wanted a general who would enact an ideologically motivated campaign. What Bell fails to consider is the broader context of military appointments at this time. Beyond executing a Republican campaign, the government wanted loyalists to ensure that the army would remain reliable. This reflected a general apprehension that the army could be turned against the Republican government or that the generals would defect.¹⁶⁹ In this situation it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine which motive held precedence. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that practical grounds existed to explain a decision that previously has been attributed to the predominance of ideology.

¹⁶⁸ Bell, *Total War*, 176.

¹⁶⁹ Jean-Paul Bertaud, *The Army of the French Revolution*, trans. R.R. Palmer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 62-63.

Similarly, the strongest suggestion that the Republic could choose practicality over ideology was its retreat from the incendiary program immediately prior to Thermidor. Faced with a war on multiple fronts and a starving population, the government took two measures. First, it removed troops from the Vendée. Second, and more importantly, it began to resettle the population. The Vendée was usually a fertile agricultural region, and its destruction was beginning to take its toll on the French stomach. As noted, the use of violence was to be severely curtailed and a plan similar to that proposed by Kléber late in 1793 was enacted.¹⁷⁰ Bell dates the end of the real brutality in the Vendée to the fall of the Héberists shortly prior to Thermidor.¹⁷¹ Given the date, the argument that the end of the brutality in the Vendée was simply part of the Thermidorian Reaction could be argued. Nevertheless, the modified and moderated campaign that took its place appeared under the auspices of the Terrorist government, thus under the auspices of many of the same radical ideologues who are supposed to have acted primarily out of an ideological interest. In short, ideology could not have been the single most compelling factor determining the course of action if the politicians who oversaw the single most ideological government of the Revolution were willing to concede to practicality.

Whatever influence the politicians may have had, they could only push so far before the generals became the arbiters of the violence, defining its characteristics and limiting or expanding its impact. Here, more than with the politicians, a diverse picture arises of professionals, amateurs, reluctant soldiers and sadists. More importantly, even when atrocities occurred, it is difficult to ascribe them primarily to ideology.

General Louis-Marie Turreau was not a willing executioner. At the very best, he was a soldier willing to take orders, but only after expressing his displeasure at being transferred to a

¹⁷⁰ Order of 21 May 1794 by the Committee of Public Safety, in Chassin, *Vendée Patriote*, 501-502.

¹⁷¹ Bell, *Total War*, 182.

theater that he viewed as a sideshow, a distraction from obtaining real glory.¹⁷² Although he has drawn much ire for his “promenades,” the plan was hardly original. It seems possible that his choice of action reflected a general indifference or lack of creativity more than any mental engagement with the situation, let alone significant ideological motivation. His correspondence contains the usual references to “brigands” and “cowards,” but it contains nothing like the brutal and demeaning language of Barère, Momoro, Westermann or Jean-Baptiste Huché. Finally, while it has become popular to highlight the ultimate self-destructiveness of his “promenades,” few seem willing to concede that his plan was in any way meant as practical. That is not to say that it ultimately was, but only that it was probably not conceived of as intentionally sadistic.

Lower down the chain of command the number of generals that not only disputed the cruelty of the columns and actually refrained from excessive killing is substantial. General Kléber is by far the best example. Commander of the advance guard of the Mayençaise, he was often the de facto commander of the Army of the West and was the author of an alternate pacification campaign that was ultimately adopted in a slightly altered form pre-Thermidor. General Nicolas Haxo, in command of the western contingent of the army, was immortalized for his humane and honorable behavior.¹⁷³ The often stunning disparity between commanders is captured by Elie Fournier when he writes of the proximate columns of Generals François Duval and Louis Grignon. “‘Everywhere I’ve been is inhabited by Patriots,’ wrote Duval upon marching his column into Moncoutant. Grignon, in the neighboring villages, found only brigands.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² Letter of 8 October 1793, in Chassin, *Vendée Patriote*, 241-42.

¹⁷³ Jérôme Laborieux, “Les Mayençais et la Guerre de Vendée,” in *Détruisez la Vendée : Regards Croisés sur les Victimes et Destructures de la Guerre de Vendée*, ed. Jacques Hussenet (La Roche-sur-Yon: Centre Vendéen de Recherches Historiques, 2007), 347 ; Bell, *Total War*, 180.

¹⁷⁴ Elie Fournier, *Turreau et les Colonnes Infernales* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1985), 53. See also Simone Loidreau, *Les Colonnes Infernales en Vendée* (Cholet: Les Editions du Choletais, 1994), 31-32.

Nevertheless, those who were brutal must be accounted for ideologically in some way. Before further discussion, it must be clarified that the most common examples of brutality cited from the Vendée are from exceptionally cruel generals. Westermann served this role especially well, such that the vast majority of authors have repeated his letter to the Committee of Public Safety that he “had...not a single prisoner with which to reproach myself” almost ad nauseam.¹⁷⁵ Grignon was another example of a butcher, as was Huché, a notorious drunk and an advocate of total extermination.¹⁷⁶ It is easy to call these men ideological diehards, and to claim that their method derived from a Republican mentality of total war. Yet it is more difficult to entertain the possibility that these men were quite simply of an inclination that would have led them to the same bloody conclusion without any prodding from a Manichaeian ideology. On this point, Jean-Clément Martin arguably provides the most equitable perspective. He notes that daily life in French culture at the time was rife with resort to extreme and brutal violence, a cultural factor that may have predisposed certain people to the Revolutionary violence espoused by the Terrorist government. More specifically, he states that “this general climate allowed numerous individuals to participate in the Terror by an ignorance of the exact importance of their acts or for reasons that had nothing to do with the political interests of the Revolution.”¹⁷⁷

The frustrating fact of the matter is that the available documentation hardly provides the necessary material to discern the relative importance of ideology to the individuals involved. With the generals especially, one is left with the rather unsatisfying conclusion that no incontrovertible evidence exists either way. At the very most it can be said that the confidence placed in the ideological perspective by so many authors assumes more than it can prove.

¹⁷⁵ The present author is aware that he himself has resorted to this quote in his introduction. Perhaps it is because of the unspeakably horrible idea that it conveys that the quote is always used, but it also demonstrates what really could and did happen in the Vendée in the worst of cases.

¹⁷⁶ Fournier, *Turrea*, 75-77.

¹⁷⁷ Jean-Clément Martin, *La Vendée et la France* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1987), 238, 241.

Attempting to weigh the relative importance of ideology to the soldiers presents an even more daunting task, but it is one that must be attempted.

About the best that can be hoped for is some sense of how much ideology in the form of propaganda managed to reach the soldiers. Two general authorities on the French revolutionary army are Jean-Paul Bertaud and Alan Forrest. Both directly address the attempts of the radical Jacobins to mould the minds of the soldiers. Bertaud, a Jacobin at heart, should give a resounding affirmation to the place of ideology in the armies. Yet, despite his basic conviction that the army was revolutionized, he hardly seems convinced that the most radical ideas had either universal or consistent sway, but rather that fierce ideology was limited to a *sans-culotte* minority.¹⁷⁸ Forrest casts even greater doubt on the success of the “*école* of Jacobinism,” noting that the quick transfer of loyalty to the post-Thermidor regime indicates a minimum of radical ideological conviction.¹⁷⁹ Naturally, it would be totally irresponsible to claim that these two quick statements concerning a nation in arms can be applied specifically to somewhere around 80,000 men in one theater. Nevertheless, propaganda efforts were intense in armies throughout France. Their limited success elsewhere should cast doubt on the success of the propaganda system in general.

Both Bertaud and Forrest make note of the *Bulletin de l'Armée des Côtes-de-Brest*, a document that is conspicuously absent in most discussions of the Vendée.¹⁸⁰ This absence is difficult to explain as it represents one of the most direct attempts by the military to influence the thinking of its soldiers. Given the intensity of many of the generals, the fact that the period coincided with the Terror, and the brutality of the combat, one would expect a reflection in the language of the Bulletins. Instead, the Bulletins from September and October 1793, only months

¹⁷⁸ Bertaud, *Army*, 225.

¹⁷⁹ Alan Forrest, *Soldiers of the French Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 124.

¹⁸⁰ Bertaud, *Army*, 217; Forrest, *Soldiers*, 112.

before the promenades began and at the height of the brutality of the *Grande Guerre*, are surprisingly moderate in their tone.

The Bulletins use predictably denigrating language to describe the rebels, calling them “cowards” and “brigands.” It has been noted that these appellations fall on the soft side of the available vocabulary. One edition mentions the Vendéens “fleeing with the wings of fear.”¹⁸¹ Although veiled references to mistreatment of the population by the rebels exist, they in no way draw a lurid picture of abuses that might further inflame the soldiers.¹⁸² On the same page as one such reference, the Bulletin refers to a willingness to fight every last brigand to the death. This might carry more weight for the advocates of genocide and exterminationist warfare if it were not also paired with a declaration of amnesty for those willing to surrender. Beyond that, the same issue contains laudatory mention of those soldiers who showed respect for private property and an account of grateful Vendéens freed from the rebels.¹⁸³

However, the Bulletin from 22 October 1793 is atypical in its use of extreme language to describe the rebels, calling them “pest-ridden animals” who fought for “fanaticism” while extolling their bloody destruction.¹⁸⁴ First, one must always resist the temptation to infer broader truth from compelling but isolated anecdotes. Second, the same article speaks of a need to respect private property as the army moved out of the region of the *Vendée militaire*, a proscription that must be born in mind at a later point in this chapter. One should also note that this bulletin was signed by Jean-Baptiste Carrier, one of the most radical Representatives on Mission in the theater, and certainly the most infamous. In other words, aside from the 22 October 1793 bulletin, the sort of exterminationist language so prevalent in political tracts is

¹⁸¹ *Bulletin de l'Armée des Côtes-de-Brest*, Number 18, in *The French Revolution Research Collection*, (Oxford: Pergamon Press, n.d.), 94.

¹⁸² *BACB*, Number 21, in *ibid.*, 118. The soldiers could probably fill in the details by experience.

¹⁸³ *BACB*, Number 21, in *ibid.*, 121.

¹⁸⁴ *BACB*, Number 40, in *ibid.*, 221.

basically absent and just three months before the march of the columns a relatively moderate message was delivered to the soldiers. Naturally, this hardly constitutes incontrovertible evidence, but the moderation of such a public document calls into question the idea that the soldiers were being exposed in any concentrated or regular way to a radical republican and exterminationist ideology.

This argument is not simply about the degree to which ideology may have motivated killing. Inherent in any substantial attribution of the killing to ideology is the assumption that the killing was purposeful, that it was directed and controlled by some internal logic, even if not by direct orders. Reynauld Secher makes this point bluntly when he refers to the pacification campaign of early 1794 as “systematic extermination” and “a cool organization of genocide.”¹⁸⁵ In other words, it was purposeful and controlled.¹⁸⁶ For the moment, it should be said that the claim of genocide cannot be proven or disproven until the nature of the killing has been better established. Plausible grounds for brutal killing can exist independently of ideology. Such reasons are based on the breakdown of order rather than the purposeful direction of violence. At the combat level, more evidence exists to support the alternative view than that of ideology.

Before a more detailed discussion can be pursued, the exact goals of the promenades must be fully understood. Much has been made of Turreau’s correspondence with the Committee of Public Safety, especially his letter of 15 January 1793, claiming that it was “my intention to burn everything...as such, you must pronounce in advance the fate of the women and children that I encounter....if it is necessary to bayonet all of them, I cannot execute such an order

¹⁸⁵ Secher, *A French Genocide*, 111.

¹⁸⁶ The question of genocide in the Vendée deserves, and has received, numerous article length works and is addressed in the last chapter of this thesis.

without an order condoning my actions.”¹⁸⁷ Without doubt, it shows the length to which Turreau was willing to go, but it hardly completes the picture. The actual orders to the generals commanding the columns from 17 January reflect this concern, stating that “one should employ all means to uncover the rebels; all are to be bayoneted....”¹⁸⁸ The rest of the rather substantial order is dedicated to the requisition of food stuffs and the burning of anything that might serve as a rebel refuge.

Be that as it may, those orders might still be interpreted as sufficiently vague to purposefully allow brutal suppression. However, Turreau’s special order of 19 January greatly qualifies that of 17 January, and is worth quoting at length.

All brigands found in possession of arms, or convicted of having taken them to revolt against *la patrie*, will be bayoneted. One will do the same with women and children in the same circumstances. Those who are merely suspected will no longer be spared, *but no execution may be carried out without previous orders from the commanding general* [italics by author]....No harm shall be inflicted upon men, women and children that the general recognizes as good citizens, and who have not participated in the revolt...they shall be free to pass to the rear of the army, to find asylum, or reside in one of the points to be spared burning.¹⁸⁹

Many authors have used the injunction to kill even those suspected of rebellion without any reference to the rest of the order. They totally ignore the attempt to put restrictions on killing by mandating the column’s commanding general’s approval, nor do they consider the order to

¹⁸⁷ Turreau to the Committee of Public Safety, 15 January 1794, in J. J. M. Savary, *Guerres des Vendéens et des Chouans contre la République Française* (Paris: Badouin Frères, 1825), 3: 41.

¹⁸⁸ Ordre de Général en Chef, 17 January 1794, in *ibid.*, 43.

¹⁸⁹ Instruction Relative à l’Exécution des Ordres Donnés par le Général en Chef de l’Armée de l’Ouest, contre les Brigands de la Vendée, 19 January 1794, in *ibid.*, 56-57.

relocate loyal patriots behind the army and within the Vendée. But again, the matter of killing was only part of the broader order.

The room for interpretation of these orders clearly expresses itself in the correspondence between Turreau and his generals. The majority of books on the Vendée might lead one to expect a disproportionate emphasis on killing in the correspondence. Instead, the majority of it is given to quotidian affairs such as troop movements, reports on minor engagements, the state of the troops and other elements of the pacification campaign including burning villages and requisitioning money and grain. One might even pause to take note of the execution of a hussar for wrongfully killing an elderly patriot.¹⁹⁰ The nature of the accounts of killing is grossly uneven; some go into great detail, but many are extremely vague to the point of failing to give even a rough number of those executed in many instances. Details held to be proof of rebellious activity or intent also varied. Thus, Grignon ordered the execution of an unspecified number of women and children found in a church with a white flag, while General Prévignaud's column at times found it difficult to spot even one rebel.¹⁹¹ Even authors like Loidreau concede that substantial variations existed between columns, though she quickly re-emphasizes the brutality of the campaign as a whole.¹⁹²

None of this is meant to dissuade the reader from believing that many horrible atrocities were committed, nor that they did not receive some form of official sanction. What matters is the degree to which the correspondence cannot decisively account for how brutal the fight became. As much as the reports of the Representatives on Mission and generals may speak of bloodshed, they hardly approach the graphic accounts of soldiers raping and then bayoneting women,

¹⁹⁰ General Cordelier to General Turreau, late January, in *ibid.*, 68-69.

¹⁹¹ Grignon to Turreau, 22 January 1794, in *ibid.*, 60-61; Prévignaud to Turreau, 25 January 1794, in *ibid.*, 70.

¹⁹² Loidreau, *Colonnes*, 33-34. Loidreau is an excellent example of the genre that attempts to bring out the worst excesses and present them as the norm. That is not to say that she is wrong to highlight them and mention that they were common, only that she thereby skews the broader picture.

carrying children on bayonets and cutting off children's hands. Nor do they account for the tanning of Vendéen skins or women and children being thrown into ovens while still alive.¹⁹³ Quite simply, a gap exists between official documentation and the lurid accounts of barbarity that have been gathered from various sources from all parties. Beyond citing certain columns as more cruel than others, the available documents generally do not attribute atrocities to specific individuals. It may very well be that events unfolded as they did in Nantes, where two units were the primary perpetrators of Revolutionary violence.¹⁹⁴

Nevertheless, good contextual evidence exists that can help explain the slide into barbarity. First, a short digression on the matter of ideology is necessary. Beyond the concern that soldiers may have been minimally exposed to propaganda or affected by it, recent work on the dynamics of mass killing and genocide by social psychologist James Waller calls into question the real motivating power of ideology. Rather than looking to ideology, he suggests that ideology may serve primarily as a rationalizing force. As he states it, “[w]e want to assume that mass killing and genocide are simply inherited from cultures and ideologies that preceded a regime's rise to power...[a]dmitting that culture or ideology may simply be the pretext by which we rationalize a more general will to dominate and destroy is much more discomfoting.”¹⁹⁵ This thesis will not enter the treacherous ground of psychological analysis for simple lack of documentation. Nevertheless, the fact that a social psychologist who works in Holocaust studies, an example of a far more ideological event that built on a far longer development of ideology and acted upon a far more refined concept of the victim population, should catch the reader's attention. He is not simply presenting a new theory, but is expanding on and refining decades of

¹⁹³ Secher, *Genocide*, 134; Loidreau, *Colonnes*, 31; Forrest, *Soldiers*, 161.

¹⁹⁴ Matin, *Vendée*, 217; A report by Hentz and Francastel openly denies the cruelty of the soldiers in the Vendée. As it was written after Thermidor, however, this may very well have been a move to exonerate themselves. *Rapport de Hentz et Francastel* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, September-October 1794), 2.

¹⁹⁵ James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 53.

his own and others' psychological research that has shown man to be capable of acting brutally with little or no ideological or even logical provocation.

Given the violence committed by the soldiers of the military promenades, it is understandable that any atrocities committed by the Vendéen rebels may have been overshadowed if not forgotten. Simon Schama provides a graphic account of the Machecoul massacre perpetrated by the Vendéens at the very beginning of the hostilities. In this episode, prisoners were made to dig their own graves before being shot and one priest was stabbed to death by bayonet.¹⁹⁶ While it can be said that the Vendéens were basically more merciful than their Republican opponents, in a struggle like the Vendée such a conclusion does not necessarily mean very much. Whatever the relative extremity of brutality, both sides of the conflict were aware of the antipathy and physical threat that existed should they fall into the hands of the other. By the time of Turreau's march, whatever remaining humanity the rebels may have been capable of showing had disappeared and the situation deteriorated to the point that no quarter was given by either side. It would be easy to lay the blame for this policy on the Republican policies exercised in early 1794, but understanding the conflict from the perspective of the combatants demands a strong reiteration of Martin's comment that "the vicious circle of atrocities rapidly closed."¹⁹⁷ By February the Republican soldiers had learned a new fear of the rebels who were no longer ideologically motivated but were fighting with the desperation of condemned men.¹⁹⁸ In this way, a culture of vicious killing existed that may well have developed its own momentum independent of ideological reasoning.

This issue touches on another misrepresentation of the promenades. Most works on the Vendée have a tendency to downplay or fail to mention at all the fact that the promenades, far

¹⁹⁶ Schama, *Citizens*, 691-692.

¹⁹⁷ Martin, *Vendée*, 243.

¹⁹⁸ Le Répresentant Dubois Crancé au Ministre, 2 February 1794, in *Ibid.*, 137-138.

from marching unobstructed through the countryside, continued to meet resistance. Vendéen resolve had stiffened and, as noted, by early February the heavily engaged Republicans were forced to evacuate Cholet.¹⁹⁹ Rebel resistance at no point posed a serious threat to the rest of France, but it did further brutalize the conflict by inaugurating true guerilla-style warfare that almost undoubtedly hardened Republican soldiers against the civilian population.

This vicious cycle may have been the raw stuff of the brutalization of the conflict, but other mechanisms more subtle than ideology may have been at work. Consider again the basic order of 17 January. The directive to burn dwellings and requisition goods, while they do not directly involve killing, cannot be divorced from the order to execute rebels. In context, such activities would have served to condition Republican forces to characterize and behave toward the Vendéen public in a certain way. The act of purposefully destroying another human being's dwelling and essentially stealing their possessions may trigger a degree of desensitization to their physical welfare that may lead to an intensification of brutality or engagement in killing where before one might have abstained.

Admittedly this process is basically speculative as verification would require documentation beyond that which exists, but it is worth considering. Still, other theories of group dynamics exist that are less dependent on precise documentation. One is the theory of group absolutism. Given the hostility of the environs, Republican soldiers must have been profoundly aware of their dependence upon each other for survival. This sort of solidarity not only reassured soldiers but, according to a massive corpus of research in social psychology, it intensifies the individual's basic inclinations.²⁰⁰ That the average Republican soldier disliked the Vendéens seems obvious, and even this basic fear and dislike was probably magnified many times over by

¹⁹⁹ Fournier, *Turreau*, 65.

²⁰⁰ Waller, *Evil*, 52-53.

the basic force of group polarization. Beyond that, the sort of peer pressure to engage not only in killing but in atrocity, in certain units at any rate, must have been intense.²⁰¹

Before these group dynamics can occur, however, the germ of killing must be implanted in the soldier. Here the influence of the authority is important. Dave Grossman suggests that the willingness of a man to kill is closely linked to the pressure that is exerted on him to do so by his leader. He breaks the leader's level of influence into four factors; "[the] proximity of the authority figure to the subject...[the] killer's subjective respect for the authority figure...[the] intensity of the authority figure's demands for killing behavior...[the] legitimacy of the authority figure's authority and demands."²⁰² The question of respect is impossible to prove one way or the other, but the others are more promising. Column commanders traveled with their columns, constantly overseeing their activities and were therefore proximate. The intensity of the command to kill seems to be directly related to column commanders who, as noted, varied greatly in their enthusiasm for killing. The absence of the initial intense demands of authority to kill may very well explain the relative absence of atrocity in columns commanded by more moderate generals.

Given the aforementioned potential sources of non-ideologically motivated killing and brutalization, the discussion must turn back to the issue of control. All of the previous factors could impact the behavior of the soldiers in a way that did not introduce tension into the relationship between an officer and his men. However, while many officers may have encouraged brutality, it is also possible that the soldiers were acting on their own initiative, even against the will of the officers. The refusal to obey and the inability of commanders to control their units casts doubt on the intentionality of the atrocities committed in the Vendée.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 261.

²⁰² Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2009), 144-45.

A report from the district of Challans dated 5 January 1794 details the exasperation of inhabitants who, returning to their city after its liberation from the rebels, discovered the Republican forces in a state of frenzy, pillaging and burning rampantly more than two weeks before the promenade began, and twelve days before the orders for the promenade were given.²⁰³ A similar report from the District of Cholet in late January refers to Republican troops who had “delivered themselves to debauchery, to dilapidation and all the horrors to which even cannibals are not susceptible.”²⁰⁴ These and other statements by local Vendéen authorities might easily be dismissed on the assumption that the actions of the soldiers were in fact ordered, or at least officially sanctioned.

Within the official correspondence it becomes clear that discipline problems did exist. An Order of the Day from 3 February reprimands a commander for the “pillage, theft and insubordination to which the soldiers have delivered themselves.”²⁰⁵ Peter Paret addresses the issue well:

Their [the soldiers’] deprivations combined with the savageness of their task to bring about a degree of indiscipline that seems to have been unmatched at that time by any other army of the Republic. Once Kléber had begged a subordinate not to let his men enter a town, since prying them loose “would be as difficult to do as drinking an ocean.” Now the towns were given over to pillage and destruction, and with this restraint lifted, others could not be maintained.²⁰⁶

In early February the Republican soldiers’ will to fight was already being dampened by the amount of loot they had managed to accumulate by pillage. Men were shirking and claiming

²⁰³ Le District de Challans au Général Jacob, 5 January 1794, in Chassin, *Vendée Patriote*, 184-185.

²⁰⁴ Le Président du District [to General Turreau ?], 25 January 1794, in Savary, *Guerres*, 77.

²⁰⁵ Ordre du Jour du 3 au 4 [Janvier], 3-4 January 1794, in Savary, *Guerres*, 142.

²⁰⁶ Paret, *Internal Insurrection*, 58.

sickness to be relieved of duty. On 21 March, Grignon complained loudly of his troops' refusal to fight.²⁰⁷ Issue No 26 of the *Bulletin de l'Armée des Côtes de Brest* bemoans the "flight of a Republican army before a troop of slaves" due to a lack of discipline.²⁰⁸ In his October address to the Convention, Barrère entreated the new Commander in Chief to curtail the indiscipline in Republican ranks that was bringing dishonor to their victories.²⁰⁹ Desertion does not appear to have been an issue.

To say the least, more accounts exist. A military disaster along the lines of a mutiny never developed, but the loss of control over the actions of a fighting force is crippling to the unit. Even if the complete extermination of all Vendéens had been the indisputable goal of the army, it is doubtful that it could have executed anything approaching a successful operation.

One of the best known works on systematic mass killing, Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*, repeatedly emphasizes the degree to which the killings were organized, disciplined and controlled by officers. Repeated and explicit orders were given to the men. No doubt existed as to the expectations placed on them. Certainly the men grew more callous as time went on. Nevertheless, order never seems to have disintegrated. In the Vendée, it did.²¹⁰

More to the point, such a breakdown of order may well have made possible the breakdown into *brutal* disorder that characterized the Republican pacification campaign in the Vendée. To be totally clear, the government *sought* a systematic campaign of requisition and execution of those deemed guilty of rebellion, itself an ever-changing definition in practice. In order to suggest that the brutality that appeared in the Vendée was in any way deliberate, one

²⁰⁷ Loidreau, *Colonnes*, 47-48, 68-69.

²⁰⁸ *BACB*, Number 26, in *Research Collection*, 124.

²⁰⁹ Barrère, *Rapport*, 16.

²¹⁰ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 15, 122-26.

must leap over the gap that separates written policy from the reality of its execution while ignoring the real import of other contextual factors.

This argument obviously cannot claim to be definitive, but it does suggest that the possibility exists that the level of brutality and of killing in the Vendée can be explained by factors having little or nothing to do with ideology or the intentions of the commanders and politicians. While this is hardly a satisfying conclusion, it is one that should be considered when approaching the Vendée as military history. The death grip of ideology serves only to provide a quick explanation for an event that was almost certainly more nuanced.

At an even deeper level, both the Republic and the Republican forces in the Vendée were fighting a war for survival. The Vendéen rebellion opened up the coasts to English invasion. For a moment, the rebel army seemed to pose a real threat of marching on Paris. Besides constituting a dangerous drain of manpower, it also deprived the Republic of food, taxes and generally undermined its stability. On the ground, the Republican soldiers were fighting a dirty war against a hidden enemy. One hears more than slight echoes of My Lai in the idea that even the women and children were participating in the struggle. Women and children were potential targets because they were potential combatants, hidden and unnoticed until the last minute.

Administrative bungling and general confusion left columns marching through hostile territory with little sense of direction. The weather was damp, the roads bad, and ambushes everywhere. Accordingly, Republican attempts to pacify the region were increasingly desperate as the need for men and peace grew more pressing. Certain firebrands were ready to kill every man, woman and child – as well as cow, dog, sheep and horse – in that region. Most seem to have been trying to win a counter-insurgency that was a threat to their lives.

CHAPTER 6

THE QUESTION OF GENOCIDE

In 1986, Reynauld Secher published an expanded version of his dissertation on the Vendée. By means of introduction to the section on the Infernal Columns, he referred to “a cool organization of genocide.”²¹¹ With these words, he discovered a previously inconceivable Pandora’s Box of Vendéen studies. His passion for the word is understandable, as is his hatred for the acts of brutality committed by Republicans in the Vendée. What marks his use of the word as dangerous, however, is his awkward and unprofessional use of the term. At no point does he define it. A similarly polemical Vendéen historian, Simone Loidreau, also used the term to describe Turreau’s Columns, again without any definition. Instead, she simply invoked killings in Cambodia, Bengal and the Holocaust as parallels and proceeded to cast the Infernal Columns in the worst possible light.²¹² More recently, Secher and Jean-Joël Brégeon have invoked a pamphlet by Gracchus Babeuf who coined the term “populicide” in defense of the durability of their position.²¹³ They do so despite the fact that Babeuf’s position is the quintessence of revolutionary conspiracy theories, claiming that the Robespierre and others deliberately wanted to depopulate the Vendée so that they could redistribute the land based on political principals. Babeuf’s position is, in turn, based on an even more obscure pamphlet that seems to form the core of his argument.²¹⁴

This position has not taken hold in the scholarly community. As early as 1985, François Lebrun responded to Secher’s original dissertation by invoking the *Dictionnaire Robert’s* definition of genocide - “the methodical destruction of an ethnic group” - to suggest that no proof

²¹¹ Secher, *French Genocide*, 111.

²¹² Simone Loidreau, *Les Colonnes Infernales en Vendée* (Cholet : Editions Choletais, 1994), 7. Loidreau is closely associated with the arch-conservative and Royalist “Souvenir Vendéen” and is rarely cited by anyone other than Secher.

²¹³ Secher and Brégeon, *Dépopulation*, 13.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 115-117.

of any such blatant plan, however thin, exists. Instead, he suggests that a look backwards toward royal repressions of provincial rebellions provides far more parallels with the Vendée than any modern instances of mass killing.²¹⁵ Nor does he simply consider the word “genocide” inappropriate, stating that “this French civil war was atrocious enough that it is useless to attempt to accentuate it by using an inadequate term that is nevertheless marked by a terrible symbolic charge.”²¹⁶ More recently, Jean-Clément Martin has taken a two-pronged approach. First, he has suggested that the word was used and supported by authors and scholars like Pierre Chanau - who sat on Secher’s jury - who were supporting a larger, deliberate body of anti-Revolution literature in the 1980s.²¹⁷ More importantly, rather than condemning the use of the word because it is anachronistic, which he suggests is true of many useful words, he decries the sloppy use of the word, based more on political positions than methodical and scholarly research.²¹⁸

Secher has since responded in an angry refutation in which he literally casts the debate as a war of professional academia and journalists against him personally, and recites a litany of professional offenses, recriminations and black-listings.²¹⁹ Regardless of whether or not a conspiracy of powerful French intellectuals and publicists does in fact exist to destroy the reputation and life of M. Reynald Secher, he does inadvertently make a very interesting point in the course of his own defense. He provides two definitions of genocide, one from the Nuremberg trials, the other from French law. The former is conservative, basically similar to contemporary English definitions, the latter is vastly more expansive in what it considers genocidal behavior, including, amongst others, “the forced transfer of children.”²²⁰

²¹⁵ François Lebrun, “La Guerre de Vendée: Massacre ou Génocide?,” in *L’Histoire*, no. 78, May 1985, 94-96.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

²¹⁷ Martin, *La Révolution*, 64.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 72-73.

²¹⁹ Reynald Secher, *La Désinformation autour des Guerres de Vendée et du Génocide Vendéen* (Anet : Atelier Fol’fer, 2009), 37-67.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

Whatever the merits or demerits of these definitions, it does beg the question of what exactly constitutes a genocide. A list of dictionary definitions has been included in Appendix A of this thesis. It is strikingly obvious from this list that even conservative definitions of the term are not qualitatively in accord. It is equally obvious from ten minutes of group discussion that the “real” definition of the word is not agreed upon, let alone its traits and characteristics. This is equally true in the world of academe, in which the revision, qualification or wholesale rejection or creation of terms is commonplace. Thus, while it might seem logical that this paper should argue that the Vendée was or was not a genocide, it seems impossible given that no consensus on the word exists. Rather, the word “genocide” is not only not useful, but is actually harmful to the field. To subject a situation to a word rather than use a word to describe a situation is to slight the complexity of the human experience and injure the pursuit of truth. And yet that is exactly what the genocide debate does. It focuses all events around the degree to which they fulfill a definition, and utterly subsumes the subtle dynamics of the event itself.

Nevertheless, the studies that have been dedicated to mass murder and genocide to provide an incredibly useful corpus of literature on these behaviors. The work of Waller has already been extensively invoked in this thesis. In this respect, much in the field can be salvaged despite the problematic nature of its overarching term. The root of this matter relates to constructionism. Richard L. Rubenstein notes that real mass murder has happened in a post-surplus world. In other words, with no relationship between a given population and the direct utility of food production a group loses its clear rationale. Subsequently, a rationale is constructed. Utility and desirability are both increasingly defined in terms of social values and aspirations.²²¹ Rubenstein expands the argument by suggesting that the post-surplus world has

²²¹ Richard L. Rubenstein, *Age of Triage: Fear and Hope in an Overcrowded World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 9.

seen regular attempts by governments to deliberately expunge a surplus population, whatever that definition may be, in order to streamline and organize society for the sake of another goal. His starkest example is the Turkish assault on the Armenian population. Rubenstein suggests that the phenomenon was motivated by “democratic homogenization.”²²² Democracy required uniformity, and the Armenians were protecting their privileges. As such, because a surplus population in existed in Turkey, the Armenians were not strictly necessary. In turn, the Turkish government could decide whether or not they were desirable. Given that they posed a threat to the state and given that the state owed them a significant amount of money, it made sense to eliminate the group.

Insofar as that example goes, striking parallels do exist between the Armenians and the Vendéens as they were described by the Revolutionaries. In short, the Republicans had the luxury to choose between a Republican farmer and a Royalist farmer. They certainly drew the distinction. Moreover, it was based on the same political identification, one of the most constructed forms of identity imaginable. The early notions of citizenship in Revolutionary France were only partially based on any particular concept of “Frenchness.” To be certain, the Revolutionary leaders derided the use of patois and felt that certain cultural characteristics were central to French citizenship.²²³ But above all else, it was a political and assimilationist nationalism, redefining the notion of Frenchness as an adoptable quality, at least in the earlier and headier days of the Revolution. As such, national origins were offset in importance by political inclination. The nature of this politico-cultural nationalism meant that it could be abrogated as well as gained based on political behavior. Thus, a broadside from Nantes spouted

²²² Ibid., 17.

²²³ Michael Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 1, 7.

the angry declaration to the rebels that “You are no longer our brothers, you have cut all lines of fraternity that unite us!”²²⁴

This discourse on the constructed identity of surplus populations offers an invaluable insight into the specific manifestations of in group/out group mentalities mentioned in chapter four. Critically, this dynamic allows an entire group to be judged and labeled a threat that must, in some way shape or form, be removed if the greater project of society building is to continue. But Rubenstein’s ideas run a long and complex spectrum. In his discussion he refers both to deliberate withholding of assistance, and to the deliberate and active destruction of a group.²²⁵ At one end, in the Irish Potato Famine, the English government is supposed to have withheld assistance in order to allow the Irish to die. This would serve English economic and security goals as it would eliminate small Irish landholdings and a subversive element of the British population.²²⁶ At the other end is the deliberate and active destruction of the out groups, which was the case in Armenia and Nazi Germany.

Rubenstein’s work clearly demonstrates that one generalized term for a government in some way taking a direct interest in the destruction of a group simply does not suffice, but it does provide us with the groundwork for a powerful descriptive matrix. One possible descriptive matrix is based on three spectrums. The first is the clarity of the definition for the out-group, both in terms of its own identification, and its given identification of the in-group. The second is the in-group’s perception of the out-group’s threat to its welfare. The third is the degree to which the in-group takes direct action to eliminate the out-group. This final spectrum runs all the way

²²⁴ Proclamation: Le Conseil du Département de la Loire-Inferieure aux Habitants du Pays Révolté, *Archives Municipale de Nantes*, H4.

²²⁵ Rubenstein, *Triage*, 195-97.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 124.

from breaking up the group's cohesion so as to neutralize their threat, to the actual taking of lives.

Chapter four discusses the Republican image of the “enemy” enemy in the Vendée, conventionally describing them as brigands or fanatics. The same chapter also identified the difficulties of that definition. Who was a brigand? One who took arms against the Republic was a simple definition. Nevertheless, quotes like that from Westermann suggest that some were thinking in terms of wholesale destruction of entire population, man, woman and child, regardless of their actions. We can also say that the orders finally given by Turreau, the actual commander of the army, did distinguish between those guilty of crimes against the state, those who were merely part of a suspect population, and those who were basically innocent and who were to be removed. Given the vague nature of the terminology used, it must be conceded that no clear out-group identity such as “Vendéen” ever materialized in the same way as “Jew” or “Gypsy.”

As for spectrum number two, we know that the Vendée was perceived as a serious threat. One need only recall Barère's words that the end of the Vendée would mean the end of the war. Whether or not this was hyperbolic rhetoric matters little. It was a definite threat. It is also true that by the time of the Infernal Columns, this sense of immediate threat had receded and been replaced by one of frustration at delayed progress. The next major question addresses the third spectrum, which is the nature of the government's attempt to eliminate the threat. Again, chapter four has shown the difficulty of generalizing. Different columns behaved in different ways. But, the fact that many did avoid wholesale slaughter suggests inconsistency that defies the idea that a cohesive extermination program did exist or it was being carried out. More importantly, we can observe higher level decisions such as the repopulation programs. As far as we know, those who

were removed in the refugee programs were cared for, suggesting that the actual destruction of the population regardless of their threat or past actions was not part of a clear government project.

The ultimate point is that no strong evidence exists to suggest that any coherent genuinely pursued program ever existed. Either side can find proof. Secher can selectively target Westermann and Grignon, while the present author can selectively target Kléber and Haxo to argue that no one seriously considered wholesale destruction. Both would be wrong if they argued absolutes, both are correct if they argue aspects. The Vendée is sufficiently complicated that attempts to reduce it to something as coherent and extended as the Holocaust run into immediate confusion and founder on a massive diversity of actions. On the other hand, it is impossible to deny similarities in some of the rhetoric, and even in the actions of some individuals. Here, the best summary is probably to say that the fighting in the Vendée might have devolved into an attempt by the Republicans to completely destroy the local population among some more definite definition, but it did not. It was possible, but it did not happen.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The fear of life and limb motivated those who fought in the Vendée. Their worldviews and social systems provided the discourses by which they expressed themselves. As with any other historical topic, the similarities between humans in different ages can easily be masked by the differences in how we project or pursue our needs. Bearing in mind the common human priority of safety, we can learn to respond to complicated events by searching first for the most deeply seated interest that we can find, and seeing all subsequent actions as resulting from those primordial priorities.

At some point, every historian should question the utility of their work. This requires a move from the specific to the general. The subject of the Vendée presented as a struggle for survival provides at least two critical lessons to the modern reader. Both of these lessons reference the discussion of human nature as it has been explored in this thesis, in both specific and general forms.

The first concerns understanding and fighting a counterinsurgency. A complete work on the Vendée would include a discussion of the final pacification of the region. This constitutes the acid test for the long-term commitments and motivations of the Vendéens rebels. While it is true that concessions for religious toleration contributed significantly to the ultimate pacification, the final government policy also included extensive and complete amnesties and a much less aggressive military policy. Even here, oversimplification prevails. For example, Emile Gabory frames the issue of pacification as though religion was the only important element. This seems to completely ignore the fact that fighting had already diminished almost to the point of non-existence after December 1793, prior to the aggressive Republican military policy re-

illuminating it.²²⁷ That is to say, he glosses over the fact that fighting had at one point already ended without policies of religious toleration.

With any counter-insurgency, one must tread carefully and attempt to distinguish the various motives of its participants. The most obvious motive, such as religion, may simply be a means of directing other, more basic concerns. For the army attempting to execute a counter-insurgency, it is critical to know that brute force is not likely to convince a rebelling population that the state can ensure their security or in any way meet their demands. Compromise is essential to ending a counter-insurgency, and truly understanding the complaints of the rebelling population is central to compromise. More basically, an army seeking to subdue a counter-insurgency must recognize the limits of precise conventional force. No matter how well trained an army's soldiers may be, they will inevitably find themselves in confused and overwhelming circumstances. In this case, minimal force and maximal political and economic action that clearly and immediately addresses the fundamental concerns of the rebelling group is the best course of action.²²⁸

The second lesson is a broad statement about humanity in general. When it dominates our thinking, the survival instinct provides very little room for reason or patience. In these last pages it seems apropos to integrate some of the ideas presented in the thesis with broader psychological considerations. In a state of intense fear, all neural activity in the frontal lobe ceases. The most human, reasoning, logical part of our brain goes entirely blank. The subject of the fear is irrelevant; it can range from a poisonous snake one foot away from a bare leg to the prospect of slight social disgrace. If it is understood and perceived as a serious threat, the sympathetic nervous system will engage as rapidly as though it were a threat of imminent death. The mind

²²⁷ Gabory, *Guerres*, 454.

²²⁸ David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 263-67, 280-81.

responds by making quick, generalized and unsubtle distinctions and judgments that are meant to resolve the immediate threat. That is, it does not respond by considering long-term causes or subtle differences. This is the neurology that underpins the extreme in-group out-group reactions that were presented earlier in the thesis.²²⁹

This is a universal, undeniable human trait, and we can say with great certainty that the people in the Vendée, Republican and Royalist alike, were under extreme stress and fear. Their first recourse was almost certainly not understanding, but the creation of clear distinctions between who could and could not be trusted. Ideology can create enemies. In this it is like any other construction we as humans choose to make. But it can also clarify our perception of others that we already perceive as enemies. Insofar as that is true, ideology is indisputably important to the process or differentiation of people into friends and enemies. It provides a very powerful label and suggested course of action toward the out group. In this context, Alain Gérard's characterization of the pre-war as a "dialogue of the deaf" makes eminent sense.

However, fear probably did not simply produce two sides from which to choose. This thesis already has defended the position that multiple distinct possible motives impacted the fighting in the Vendée. Recent research by Guy-Marie Lenne seriously suggests that a substantial group of locals simply opted out of the conflict altogether, or at least as best they could. These were the refugees who, without resistance and sometimes without compulsion, left their homes for safer departments. As Lenne astutely notes, this utterly contradicts both Royalist and Republican historiography. Lenne contends that the old literature presents the Vendée as mobilizing man, woman and child for one side or the other. His own research suggests that many

²²⁹ Christophe André, *Psychologie de la Peur: Craintes,angoisses et Phobies* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2005), 13-16. André's work is particularly pertinent because it deals with phobias, which all too often deal with constructed fears rather than immediate bodily threats.

simply tried to live. While this may seem obvious, it had not been seriously addressed until Lenne's work.²³⁰

This is not the only field experiencing similar revision. Recent work on the Peninsular War by Charles Esdaile and John Tone has utterly destroyed the traditional perception of the conflict in Spain as a fight between brave Spanish freedom fighters and the French. Instead, they present a vision of a population thrown into a state of anarchy by invasion and insurrection. In the midst of the anarchy, the threat to individual welfare became so great that many were forced to join some side, at least temporarily, simply to avoid retribution.²³¹ We know that the Republicans in the Vendée were willing to threaten lives to enforce loyalty, but it was not unknown for Vendéens to do the same.

So too, the motivation to pillage should not be underestimated. The reference in chapter two to the riot in Saint-Florent-le-Vieil clearly shows that certain members of the mob were more than willing to use the opportunity to steal. It may well be that third party banditry was not a problem in the Vendée, but that does not exclude the possibility that many joined the Royalist army merely for the sake of pillage. It must be considered an unproven possibility.

Academics are trained to seek strong, logical explanations for past events. This can be advantageous as well as dangerous. While it can help dissect a situation more thoroughly, it can also lose sight of human irrationality. Humans can and often do rationalize actions in ways that may well be unrelated to their actual cause. One way to counteract this bias is to seek to understand the priorities of those being studied before all else. Those priorities may even contradict to a degree the logic used to pursue them and defend the pursuit. But it is surely by

²³⁰ Lenne, *Réfugiés*, 11-16.

²³¹ Charles Esdaile, *Fighting Napoleon: Guerrillas, Bandits and Adventurers in Spain, 1808-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 199; John Tone, *The Fatal Knot: The Guerrilla War in Navarre and the Defeat of Napoleon in Spain* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 178.

focusing on the actions, the actual pursuit of some goal that an individual's interests stand clearest. This is true of ourselves as much as it is true of the historical subject. We are united with our subjects in at least this one way; we are overburdened by a consciousness that rationalizes life without the capacity for absolute truth. When humans then describe their own behavior, they seek complex explanation for simple beliefs.

Throughout the war, the people involved fought to maintain some kind of control of their lives in the midst of desperate circumstances. While some may have fought for ideas, most probably fought for survival. The Vendéens fought to protect a way of life that was synonymous with predictability and safety. The Republicans fought to preserve the gains of a tenuous revolution. Whether or not their interests were incompatible is of almost no importance; the fact was that they perceived them as such. Thus, each move, each protest by either side was perceived by the other as antagonistic. Each move exacerbated an already tense situation and brought the parties closer to war. Blinded by a fear-driven rush to choose sides, to identify themselves and choose ideas and institutions that spoke to their interests, they fought a bitter and horrible conflict using these identities. Only with exhaustion and the government's willingness to moderate its policies were the parties able to find a compromise that allowed co-existence, finally ending a conflict that remains one of the worst scars of the French Revolution.

APPENDIX A
DEFINITIONS OF GENOCIDE

Listed below are a number of definitions from reputable and/or popular sources that address genocide. Attempting to compare the definitions qualitatively in text would have been excessively cumbersome. A careful reading and consideration of the following definitions, taken in full from the sources and without alterations, is sufficient to show that massive differences in the conceptualization of the term. Notice especially how some definitions accept the attempt to destroy the cultural identity of a group as genocide, especially the forced transfer of children.

*1. Genocide: 1: The use of deliberate systematic measures (as killing, bodily or mental injury, unlivable conditions, prevention of births) calculated to bring about the extermination of a racial, political, or cultural group or to destroy the language, religion, or culture of a group. 2: One who advocates or practices genocide.*²³²

2. Genocidal Massacres: There is a consensus among genocide scholars that a case of mass killing can be genocidal even if it does not constitute a genocide as strictly defined. Henry R. Huttenbach has suggested that, "In the process of categorizing acts of genocide, a secondary category ought to be included under the rubric 'genocidal,' indicative of events that can be clearly identified in character even though the crime was not consummated in toto..." Leo Kuper proposed the concept of genocidal massacre to characterize acts of mass killing that do not conform strictly to the criteria of the Genocide Convention, but have some features that do fit it. Helen Fein used the term for "massacres that are not part of a continuous genocide but are committed by an authority or other organized group against a particular ethnic or other distinguishable group." Israel Charny used the term for "events of mass murder that are on a

²³² "Genocide," in Phillip Babcock Gove, ed, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1986), 947.

*smaller scale” than genocide, and points out that this concept describes “many pogroms, mass executions, and mass murders that are, intrinsically, no less vicious and no less tragically final for the victims.”*²³³

3. *Genocide: n. the deliberate killing of a large group of people, esp. those of a particular ethnic group or nation.*²³⁴

4. *Genocide: n. m. et adj. 1. Destruction méthodique d’un groupe ethnique. → ethnocide. L’extermination des juifs par les nazis est un génocide. Le génocide des Arméniens – par ext. Extermination (d’un groupe important de personnes en peu de temps). – Dr. Crime de génocide : acte commis dans l’intention de détruire, en tout ou partie, un groupe national, ethnique, racial ou religieux, comme tel. 2. Adj. Qui pousse au génocide, tient du génocide.*²³⁵

5. *Genocide : The 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (article 2) defines genocide as “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group ... ,” including: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical*

²³³ “Genocidal Massacres,” Eric Markusen, in Israel W. Charny, ed, *Encyclopedia of Genocide: Volume I, A-H* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1999), 248.

²³⁴ “Genocide,” in Elizabeth J. Jewell and Frank Abate, *The New Oxford American Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 707.

²³⁵ “Genocide,” in Paul Robert, Josette Rey-Debove and Alain Rey, *Le Nouveau Petit Robert: Dictionnaire Alphabétique de la Langue Française* (Paris: Dictionnaires le Robert, 2004), 1175.

*destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.*²³⁶

*6. Genocide: involves the calculated targeting and killing of a specific ethnic group, or any huge deliberate killing of civilians carried out as a consequence of government policy. The word "genocide" was coined by Rafael Lemkin in his 1944 book Axis Rule in Occupied Europe to describe the mass killings of European Jews by the Nazi regime.*²³⁷

²³⁶ *Genocide* (New York: Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, United Nations, n.d), n.p. Accessed through United Nations' website, 4-30-2011.

²³⁷ "Genocide" on Conservapedia.com, last modified 9-9-2010. Accessed 4-30-2011.
<http://www.conservapedia.com/Genocide>

APPENDIX B

TIMELINE

The most thorough timeline of the Vendée is available in Jacques Hussenet's edited volume "*Détruisez la Vendée.*" This timeline covers the dates most relevant to the discussion in this thesis.

20 July 1789 – Beginning of the Great Fear

4-5 August 1789 – Abolition of corporate privilege

26 August – Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen

2 November 1789 – Confiscation of Church lands

26 February 1790 – Creation of the Départements

12 July 1790 – Passage of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy

27 November 1790 – National Assembly passes legislation requiring the oath for all clerics within two months on pain of loss of position.

February 1791 – Election of Bishop Servant to replace Mercy

10 March 1791 – Pope Pius VI condemns the CCC

11 April 1791 – Department of Paris declares freedom of worship

13 April 1791 – Pope Pius VI again condemns the CCC

Late April 1791 – Unrest in St Jean du Monts, breaking of pews

1-7 May 1791 – Rising at St. Christophe du Ligneron

7-13 May 1791 – National Assembly passes legislation framing religious toleration

1 October 1791- Opening of the Legislative Assembly

5 November 1791 – Maine-et-Loire bans processions

27 May 1792 – Legislative Assembly orders the expulsion of non-juring priests.

10 August 1792 – Overthrow of the monarchy

19-22 August 1792 – Rising at Bressuire

20-22 September 1792 – Audoin and Loiseau-Grandmaison sent to Vendée to investigate rising at Bressuire

4 March 1793 – First risings at Cholet

11-17 March 1793 – Comprehensive uprisings in west and the rise of the warchiefs

19 March 1793 – Defeat of General Marcé at Pont-Charrault

29 June 1793 – Defeat of Royalists at Nantes

17 October 1793 – Battle of Cholet

18 October 1793 – Crossing of the Loire; beginning of the Virée de Galerne

23 December 1793 – Battle of Savenay

20 January 1794 – Beginning of the Infernal Columns

13 May 1794 – Turreau recalled

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