

The Revolt of the Vendée

In the early days of March 1793 the revolutionary government's call to arms provoked violence in the Vendée. The first riots occurred on 4 March at Cholet, followed by attacks on supporters and officials of the Revolution and seizures of their weapons. On 11 March the towns of Machecoul and Bourgneuf were over-run by armed rebels and between 300 and 500 supporters of the Revolution were massacred. The next day more than 2000 rebels captured St Florent and other towns were attacked. As the rebellion spread, more towns were captured as larger rebel groups developed, led by ex-professional soldiers. A number of nobles were also invited by the rebels to become leaders. By the 19 March worried local revolutionary officials sent their report to the Minister of War.

Our affairs on the left bank of the Loire are in much worse shape. The districts of St Florent, Choloe and Vihiers pillaged, ravaged and burned, more than five hundred patriots slaughtered in these different cities. Two formidable columns of rebels led by experienced men are marching en masse on Saumur and Angers. The little army we put into the field tried in vain to battle that enormous mass. It was forced to retreat rapidly to Ponts-de-Ce in order not to be cut off.

The arrival of this news in Paris when the war was going badly fuelled deputies' fears that the Revolution was in great danger.

In this first phase of the revolt the Vendéans mostly used guerrilla tactics but the combined Catholic and Royal army, as it became known, did win battles against revolutionary troops by sheer force of numbers. At Pont-Charraut on 19 March 2000 revolutionary troops were routed and on 22 March near Chalonnes 300 revolutionary troops fled from an estimated 20,000 Vendean rebels. Between April and June rebels took control of the Vendée and fought a largely defensive campaign. They did capture and sack the cities of Saumur and Angers, and also Thouars and Fontenay though without attempting to permanently occupy them.

The debate over why the revolt broke out illustrates how historians can differ and what can happen when a **sociologist**, in this case Charles Tilly, gets involved. The traditional view was that the revolt was simply one of peasants opposed to the Revolution and motivated by royalism (they were oppressed by the Revolution and shocked by the execution of the King), resistance to conscription, religion (they were loyal to the Catholic Church or to their parish priest or curé), the self interest of their leaders and their uncritical loyalty.

In his book *The Vendée* (1964) Tilly argued that such sweeping statements about the motives of peasants were inadequate. What was needed was to explore in depth the people involved on both sides in order to explain why this revolt occurred in some places but not others. He took a sociologist's approach to the question and after many years of archival research in the Mauges area reached a number of conclusions. First, that it was a struggle between the counter-revolutionary countryside and the revolutionary towns. Second, that the lines of division were not horizontal but vertical and that peasants, bourgeois and aristocrats could be found on

sociology

This is the study of the development, structure and functioning of human society

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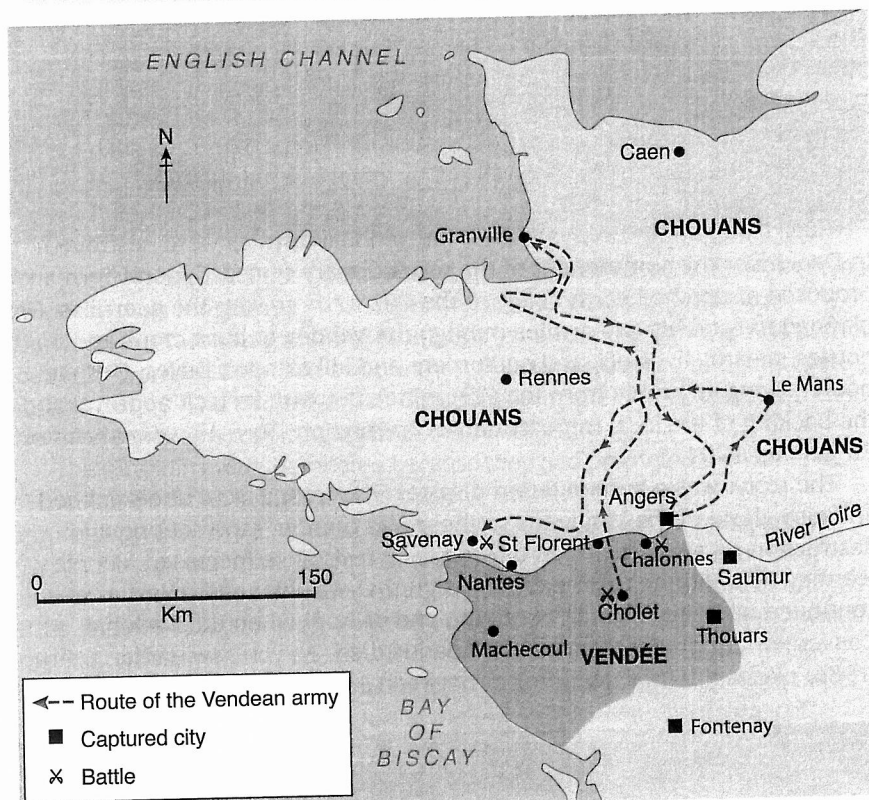


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Why did violence increase to become the Terror, 1793–94?

both sides. Third, that a sociological perspective can help to refine historical questions, something that many social historians would agree with. And for his last conclusion I'll let Tilly's words speak for him.

Finally, 'What turned the people of the Mauges against the Revolution?' still seems worth asking, but with very important provisos that no single factor, policy, motive, or group can be the answer; that one must ask which people turned, how much, and how; that firm answers can only come from systematic tests of proposed explanations in areas which did not turn against the Revolution.



◁ The revolt of the Vendée, 1793.

The Committee saw defeat of the rebels as crucial to the survival of the Revolution. In a speech to the National Convention Barère said: 'Destroy the Vendée and Valenciennes will no longer be in Austrian hands. Destroy the Vendée and the Prussians will no longer hold the Rhine. Destroy the Vendée and the English will no longer occupy Dunkirk.' Therefore additional resources were allocated to the campaign and these bore fruit in October when the rebels were defeated at Cholet. Roughly 60,000 rebels, men, women and children escaped and headed for the port of Granville where they hoped to rendezvous with a British fleet carrying reinforcements and supplies. They failed to capture the port and the British fleet did not materialise so the rebels retreated back south. Weakened by hunger and disease they failed to capture Angers, were defeated at Le Mans in December and the survivors wiped out at Savenay.

■ Think about

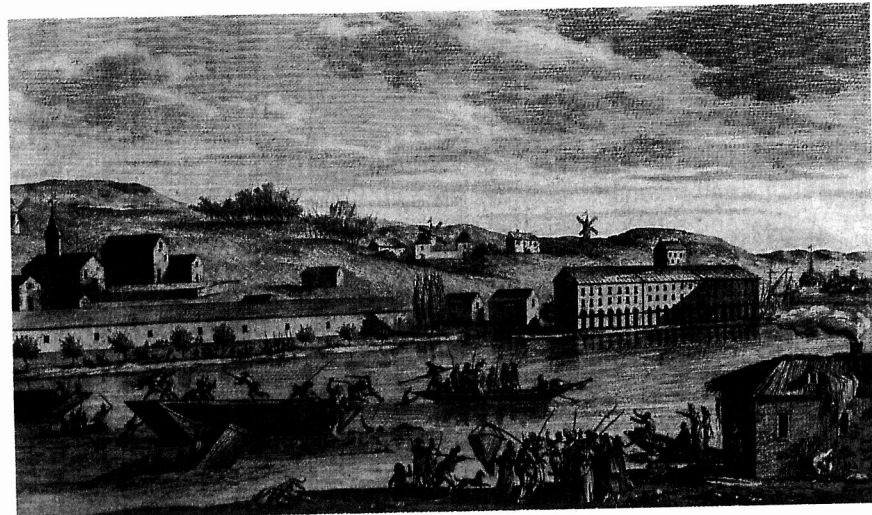
- What measures were taken to put down the revolt?
- Which factors explain the severity of punishments?

In the aftermath, thousands of rebels were imprisoned and tried by military commissions. Under the Law of 19 March armed rebels could be executed within 24 hours of capture. Military commissions sat in judgement, simply verifying a person's identity and then passing sentence of death. Over 8700 people were executed, the greatest numbers in Nantes. Most were shot by firing squads in quarries outside the town.

The representative on mission in the area was Jean-Baptiste Carrier. He became notorious for the brutality of his treatment of rebels. The *noyades* were deliberate drownings of people in the River Loire. They were done in secrecy, at night, with no records being kept. They began on 16 November when 90 priests were tied together, placed on a boat which was taken out onto the river Loire and sunk. At least seven more *noyades* were carried out and several thousand people died before they were stopped in January 1794. Historians differ as to whether this was done with the approval of the Committee and whether Robespierre was horrified by these events. Carrier did inform the Committee what he was doing but used phrases such as 'civic baptism' and 'sending to Nantes by water'. Certainly Robespierre had Carrier recalled to Paris in February 1794 to answer for his actions.

Guerrilla fighting continued after the Vendean armies were destroyed. In December the commander of the revolutionary forces, General Turreau, proposed a scorched earth policy to the CPS to try to stop the guerrillas. He planned to send his two armies through the Vendée to burn crops and houses, destroy livestock and equipment and kill all adult males. Despite not receiving any reply from the Committee but with its tacit approval and the backing of the local representatives on mission, Turreau went ahead on 20 January 1794.

The result was a humanitarian disaster. The troops were undisciplined and also afraid of the Vendean so there was murder, rape, looting and destruction on a vast scale. As a result local resistance increased. People felt they had nothing to lose. A campaign that was planned to last a week continued with great ferocity until the end of April when the National Convention ordered it stopped. Thousands died. As you saw earlier, Lebrun (1986) places the final death toll at between 150,000 and 200,000.



▷ *Noyades dans la Loire par ordre du péroce Carrier*, an engraving by Pierre Berthault. This was one of 123 plates in his pro revolutionary publication, 'Tableaux Historiques de la Révolution Française'.



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