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Reynald Secher, *A French Genocide: The Vendée*. Translated by George Holoch. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003. xvi + 305 pp. Tables, maps, and notes. \$40.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 0-268-02865-6.

Review by Peter McPhee, University of Melbourne.

By March 1793, revolutionary France was at war with Austria, Prussia, and Spain, and Britain was preparing a naval blockade. The National Convention responded to this desperate military situation by ordering a levy of 300,000 conscripts. In the west of France the levy was the pretext for massive armed rebellion and civil war, known, like the region itself, as “the Vendée.” The insurrection resulted in terrible loss of life until defeated in 1794 and left permanent scars on French society and politics. It continues to divide historians. In the long tradition of republican historiography, the scale of repression of the rebellion has been seen as a regrettable but necessary response to a military “stab in the back” at the moment of the Revolution’s greatest crisis. Over the past twenty years, however, the repression has been represented as something far more sinister.

While there have long been attempts to associate the Terror ideologically with twentieth-century totalitarianism, in 1983 a rather different link was posited by Pierre Chaunu: “The Jacobin period can only appear today as the first act, the foundation stone of a long and bloody series stretching from 1792 to our own times, from Franco-French genocide in the Catholic west to the Soviet gulag, to the destruction caused by the Chinese cultural revolution to the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia.”[1] Chaunu’s allegation was thus that the Revolution’s link with totalitarianism was one of ideology as well as revolutionary practice—the genocidal repression in the Vendée in 1793-94. The allegation was based on the claims of one of his doctoral students, Reynald Secher, on whose thesis jury he sat in 1985.

Secher’s thesis was to result in two books, both from publishing houses with which Chaunu was closely associated. One was a study of Secher’s native village, La Chapelle-Basse-Mer; the other, a broader study with the startling title of *Le Génocide franco-français*, is now translated for the first time.[2] At the outset, it must be said that it is odd for a university press to publish a translation of a book first published in 1986 without any attempt by the author to respond to the chorus of criticism it provoked when published. Nor is there any reference to the important work which has appeared since 1986, for example by Jean-Clément Martin and Michel Ragon.[3]

The claim of genocide gained Secher notoriety and certainly contributed to the commercial success of his book. It is based, however, on a radical misuse of the term and on dubious historical methodology. The term “genocide” was coined in 1944 by the Polish Jewish scholar Raphael Lemkin, who combined the Greek *genos* (race) with the Latin *cide* (killing) with a view to capturing the unique horror of the Jewish experience in Hitler’s Europe. In 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Prevention and the Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, in which genocide was defined as acts “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group.” Since then, a plethora of definitions has been developed, among them the helpful one by Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn: “A form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator.”[4] For this reviewer, the civil war in the Vendée cannot be described as “one-sided mass

killing;” nor is the evidence compelling that the Convention intended to exterminate the inhabitants of the Vendée *per se*.

There is no doubt, of course, that the Vendée resulted in extraordinary loss of life. Recent estimates have ranged from Chaunu’s ridiculous claim of 500,000 rebel deaths to Jean-Clément Martin’s estimate of up to 250,000 insurgents and 200,000 republicans.[5] Secher’s own estimate is, surprisingly, far lower, if still massive: he calculates that the 773 communes involved militarily in the war lost at a minimum nearly 15 percent of their total population (117,257 of 815,029 people) and nearly 20 percent of their housing (10,309 houses out of 53,273). In estimating so precisely the losses sustained by the insurgent population, Secher proceeds by accepting ancien régime estimates of the population of the communes involved in the civil war and compares them with the 1802 census. No consideration is given to the likelihood that much of the population had fled the war, or that losses to property may have been exaggerated subsequently.

Secher’s claim that this level of killing amounts to genocide is based on a series of statements by revolutionary officials and military commanders. On 1 October 1793, the Convention solemnly proclaimed to the army it sent to the west: “Soldiers of liberty, the brigands of the Vendée must be exterminated; the soldier of the nation demands it, the impatience of the French people commands it, its courage must accomplish it ...” A series of army officers were blunter, such as General Beaufort in January 1794 who wished to “entirely purge the soil of freedom of that cursed race” (p. 250).

In Secher’s words, “The reprisals were thus not frightful but inevitable acts that occur in the heat of battle in a long and atrocious war, but indeed premeditated, organized, planned massacres, which were committed in cold blood, and were massive and systematic, with the conscious and explicit intention of destroying a well-defined religion and exterminating an entire people, women and children first, in order to eradicate a ‘cursed race’ considered ideologically beyond redemption” (p. 251). Secher returned to the theme of genocide in a cruder polemic, *Juifs et vendéens: d’un génocide à l’autre*, in 1991.[6] While disingenuously insisting that he did not wish to relativize the Holocaust (thereby enraging Holocaust deniers), Secher made it plain that the objective of the National Convention, like the Nazi regime, was extermination: “If, despite intentions, the genocide was not carried to its conclusion, this was solely because of insufficiency of resources” (p. 253).

A difficulty for Secher is that, by April 1794, the Convention had declared itself “reassured”: “the hideous hydra” of the Vendée “can no longer speak counterrevolution, since it is all it can do to survive” (p. 252). Just when the region was at its mercy, the Convention did not proceed to extermination. It was not a genocide: huge numbers of people were killed, but not because they were a distinctive Vendéan people or because they were devout Catholics.[7] From the outset, moreover, the Convention and its military commanders counted on the support of local republicans: it was not “Vendéans” who were the enemy. The Convention considered proposals that envisaged a punitive redistribution of property from rebel families to those of local patriots. The inescapable conclusion is that this was a particularly brutal civil war. Secher’s claim that the insurgency was “above all a crusade for individual liberty” crushed by a genocidal regime tells us more about his view of recent European history than about the French Revolution (p. 249).

Much of Secher’s book is unsurprising, even if tendentious and selective. His description of the economic, religious, and social structures of the pre-revolutionary west is largely familiar, even if he exaggerates the “great wealth” of the region in order to highlight the economic as well as human destruction that followed (p. 164). Similarly, he recognizes that the rural population was impatient for change in 1789: “The Vendéans were thus nearly unanimous in wishing for change; they therefore gave a very favorable, indeed an enthusiastic welcome to the fundamental principles of the Revolution of 1789. The *cahiers de doléances* were prepared and municipal governments elected with feelings of elation, and there was no regret for the disappearance of the old parish institutions” (p. 23).

The causes of the insurrection must be sought therefore in the particular changes and disappointments occasioned by the Revolution. The Revolution brought the peasants of the Vendée no obvious benefits. Heavier state taxes were collected more rigorously by local bourgeois, who monopolized new offices and municipal councils while also buying up church lands in 1791. But, for Secher, it was above all the Revolution's secular reforms of the Church that antagonized the devout of the west. He misses, for example, the Assemblies' failure to reform the distinctive long-term tenancies of the west. The rural community responded to these accumulating grievances in 1790-2 by humiliating constitutional clergy elected by "active" citizens, by boycotting local and national elections, and by repeated instances of hostility to local officeholders. More than anything else, the conscription decree of March 1793 focused their hatreds, for the bourgeois officials who enforced it were exempt from the ballot.

The terrain of the *bocage* suited guerilla-type ambushes and retreat and exacerbated a vicious cycle of killing and reprisals by both sides convinced of the treachery of the other. The first targets of the insurgents were local officials, who were assaulted and humiliated, and small urban centers such as Machecoul, where about 500 republicans were tortured and killed in March (an episode neglected by Secher). Paradoxically, Secher's book is most disappointing in its failure to account for the atrocities committed by both sides. It is hopelessly biased history that purports to be a narrative history of the civil war but is essentially a catalogue of republican atrocities, real or alleged. True, he notes in passing that the Vendéans killed republicans and troops, but comments that "these were essentially reprisals against representatives of the government" by "courageous" Vendéans who knew that they would be "pitilessly massacred" if they surrendered (p. 114). The most fundamental question--why was the killing on both sides so extensive and so often atrocious?--is not answered. We are simply told that "the recruits were undisciplined, drunk with blood and pillage," as Secher is content to reproduce the most lurid stories as fact (p. 107).

Both at the time, and especially in later years, abundant testimony was recorded about atrocities committed by republican troops. Secher informs us as fact that, in Clisson, people who were still alive were thrown into the well of a castle; 150 women were burned to make fat. In Angers, the skin of the victims was tanned to make riding breeches for superior officers (p. 134). The same thing was done in Nantes and La Flèche (p. 134). For many such claims, Secher's references are to nineteenth-century memoirs, and the author makes no attempt to assess their veracity nor to explain why they were made.

Certainly, memories of this horrific year were etched deep into the memories of every individual and community in the west. For example, the discovery of masses of bones in Les Lucs by the parish priest in 1860 was to result in a myth, still potent today, of the "Bethlehem of the Vendée," according to which 564 women, 107 children and many men were massacred on a single day on 28 February 1794. Secher refers to this massacre as if it is fact (p. 200) and evidently has felt no need to revisit his claim in the light of later historical research.[8] Indeed, Secher has made a career from popularizing his version of Vendéan memory. Today, describing himself as a "specialist in the field of identity and national memory," he is the Director of Reynald Secher Editions, and publishes (evidently successfully) historical videos and comic books on the history of Brittany. The insurrection remains the central element in the collective identity of the people of the west of France, but it is doubtful that they--or the historical profession--have been well served by Secher's crude methodology and unconvincing polemic.

NOTES

[1] Hugh Gough, "Genocide and the Bicentenary: The French Revolution and the Revenge of the Vendée," *Historical Journal* 30 (1987), p. 978.

[2] *La Chapelle-Basse-Mer, village vendéen: révolution et contre-révolution* (Paris: Perrin, 1986). The prefaces to the French edition of *Le Génocide franco-français* by Meyer and Chaunu are missing from this English translation.

[3] The only historians referred to in passing are Charles Tilly, Paul Bois and (dismissively) Claude Petitfrère. Among the subsequent work on the Vendée, see Jean-Clément Martin, *La Vendée et la France* (Paris: Seuil, 1986); Michel Ragon, *1793: l'insurrection vendéenne et les malentendus de la liberté* (Paris: A. Michel, 1992); Paul Tallonneau, *Les Lucs et le génocide vendéen: comment on a manipulé les textes* (Luçon: Editions Hécate, 1993); Alain Gérard, *La Vendée: 1789-1793* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1992). A particularly effective review essay of works on the counter-revolution is Gough, "Genocide and the Bicentenary."

[4] Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, eds., *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 23.

[5] Martin, *La Vendée et la France*.

[6] An attack on Secher from the right is by André Martin, "Le Faux pas de Reynald Secher," *Revue d'histoire révisionniste* 4 (février-avril 1991), pp. 152-64.

[7] Note the comments of Alain Gérard, *Pourquoi la Vendée?* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1990), pp. 219-20.

[8] A more recent estimate is that between 300 and 500 of Les Lucs' 2,320 people were killed in all the fighting during the Vendéen insurrection: Jean-Clément Martin and Xavier Lardière, *Le Massacre des Lucs, Vendée 1794* (Vouillé: Geste éditions, 1992). See too Paul Tallonneau, *Les Lucs et le génocide vendéen. Comment on a manipulé les textes*.

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