"Courtesans of the King":
Diplomats and the French Revolution

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During the Revolution, the committed often targeted nobles for opprobrium—or death. The diplomatic corps was particularly vulnerable because, like the officer corps of the army, it was dominated by aristocrats. Studying the careers and fate of such men who often had faithfully served the king for many years illumines the larger issue of loyalty to the Revolution and underscores the importance of individual actions. By their action or inaction the diplomats of the old regime could sabotage revolutionary France's

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relations with the rest of the world and isolate the new
government. More than twenty-four years of warfare
ensued and ended only with the defeat of that child of the
Revolution, Napoleon, and the restoration of the Bourbon
dynasty the revolutionaries so abhorred.

Because the French revolutionaries shared a vision of
establishing a new order at home and abroad, they aimed to
jettison the old order and everything associated with it—
whatever in Tocqueville's words, "even bore, however
faintly, [its] imprint." Diplomacy bore that imprint rather
heavily. The diplomatic system and the diplomats who
served in it, whom Napoleon derisively dubbed "the
brilliant butterflies of the panniers age," were particularly
vulnerable because the diplomatic system was so tainted by
its association with aristocracy and the old regime.

Concomitant with a new social and political order was a
new diplomatic one. The ideological revolution in France
meant the rejection of the norms and practices of classical
diplomacy or, in the words of Jacques Pierre Brissot de
Warville (1754-1793), "all the old formulas, all the pitiable
rubrics, all the deadly annoyances of modern politics."

That rejection translated into an evisceration of the
diplomatic corps. When Charles, comte de Vergennes, left
the Foreign Ministry in 1787 it was one of the best in
Europe. Before the Revolution, the nobility

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2 Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French

3 *Napoleon's Letters to Marie Louise*, ed. Charles De La Roncière

4 J. P. Brissot, *Discours de J.P. Brissot, député, sur les dispositions
des puissances étrangères, relativement à la France, et sur les
préparatifs de guerre ordonnés par le Roi* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale,
1791), 43.

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Victor-François, duc de Broglie, a distinguished soldier who became Minister of War in 1789, compared this group to a chivalric order which was bound by "the same sentiments" and personal alliances. To belong to this "elegant and refined" milieu one had to be "de la famille." According to Edelstein, 89.7% or thirty-five out of thirty-nine of the "high diplomats" were nobles. A member of the bourgeoisie could only hope for at most a minor post as resident or chargé d'affaires.

By 1799 the "courtesans" had resigned or had been recalled or dismissed. Individuals from what Broglie called "the secondary ranks of the former diplomatic corps" who had been unable to obtain important posts under the old regime moved up the diplomatic ladder. Even they were suspect, often under scrutiny, and were dismissed or resigned. Incompetents (not that they were exclusive to the revolutionary governments), political cronies, ideologues, and increasingly because of their growing power, army officers held diplomatic positions. Periodically the revolutionaries purged the diplomatic corps using ideology as their criteria. They attacked not only the nobles, but also those who had worked under or sympathized with the old regime, and those who had allied with particular political factions. Political ideology rather than merit or experience

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became the prime consideration for diplomatic appointments.

The revolutionaries strove to purge the diplomatic system not only of aristocrats but also of anyone tainted by experience during the old regime. Brissot voiced the suspicion of many when he argued that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had been screened "from the influence of the Revolution." He saw there "the same form, the same mystery, the same falsity of language." There only the king existed, not the National Assembly. Diplomats spoke of the king, not the nation. Brissot wondered when "the language of diplomacy [would] purify itself." Underlying this critique was suspicion about the loyalties of those who represented France abroad.

The problem that the revolutionaries confronted was how to choose "simple citizens" with "clear judgments and just hearts" to carry the new ideology abroad. Such appointments proved contentious. In the spring of 1791 when the diplomatic list was read before the National Assembly only one French representative, Guillaume Bonne-Carrère, the secretary of the Jacobin club, could clearly be identified as a patriot. His fellow Jacobins denounced his acceptance as "apostasy," an interesting indictment that revealed the revolutionaries' persistent aversion to the diplomatic office. The secretary had in some ways betrayed the faith. Danton, for one, argued that Bonne-Carrère could no longer be regarded as "a friend of liberty."

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9 Brissot, Discours de J.P. Brissot, député, sur les dispositions des puissances étrangères, 43-44.
In 1791 Brissot charged that the Foreign Minister feared to send a "Popilius to the court of kings." He alluded to the representative of ancient Rome who had successfully challenged a king who had defied the Roman republic. Instead of choosing such stalwart men, the Foreign Minister retained those who had been promoted "in the filth of the old diplomacy" and who maintained "the same aristocratic system" in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In short, the diplomatic corps was "entirely reserved for the privileged and [for] creatures of the old regime." These "valets" still "speak of the king their master and decry the nation." Could the nation, Brissot asked, ever trust agents whom it was "easy to circumvent and seduce," especially when they were "chosen by an executive power whom the nature of things renders perhaps an enemy of liberty"?

Nor was Brissot alone when he raised the query: "Is there a greater folly than leaving in the foreign courts those most closely associated with the old regime?" In many instances that was not an option because beginning in 1790 many of France's representatives who had been appointed by the king refused to serve the revolutionary regime and resigned or left their posts in the charge of another official. For example, Jean-Baptiste Gedeon de Malescombes de Curières, baron de Castelnau, the French resident at Geneva since 1781, officially resigned in August

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12 Brissot, *Discours de J.P. Brissot, député sur les dispositions des puissances étrangères*, 47.
14 Ibid., 8.
1790 and joined the counter revolutionaries led by Artois, the king's brother.17

The problem of ensuring that those who held governmental posts were loyal to the Revolution surfaced early. On 17 November 1790 the National Assembly required all members of the diplomatic corps to swear an oath of allegiance to the new regime.18 Those who refused to take the oath and had not yet resigned faced immediate dismissal and automatic disqualification from holding any public office. On 30 December 1790 the Foreign Minister, Armand Marc Montmorin de Saint Hérem turned over to the Assembly the list of those who had taken the oath. Most had, but some, such as Marquis Marc-Marie de Bombelles, an experienced diplomat who had been appointed ambassador to Venice in 1789, had refused.19 François-Joachim de Pierre de Bernis, another distinguished diplomat stationed at Rome, had taken another oath, the oath to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy mandated for all clergy by a November 1790 decree. But he had done so only after adding a qualification about his religious obligations.20 That qualification cost him both the ambassadorship at Rome, which he had held since 1769,

17 Louis Bergès, "Le Roi or la Nation? Un Débat de conscience après Varennes entre diplomats français," Revue d'histoire diplomatique 98 (1984): 33. We must thank Orville Murphy for pointing out this excellent article. See also M. Prevost and Roman D'Amat, eds., Dictionnaire de biographie française (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1933-), 9:1406.
18 Eric Thompson, Popular Sovereignty and the French Constituent Assembly 1789-91 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1952), 149.
20 Masson, 87, note 1.
and the archbishopric of Albi, which he had held since 1764.\textsuperscript{21}

The actions of Bombelles and Bernis seemed to confirm the suspicions of many that the diplomatic corps was riddled with ultraroyalists. On 28 January 1791 the infamous orator and Jacobin, Honoré-Gabriel Riquetti, comte de Mirabeau, called with Montmorin's approval for a purge of the diplomatic personnel. He wanted to employ only those individuals who

\begin{quote}
would not compromise French power by doubting its success [and] who are not strangers to the new language that they should voice. Those whose ignorance of the regeneration of their country or whose ancient prejudices or whose long experience in serving a despotism would compromise their duties and not permit them to raise themselves to the heights of a system of liberty cannot serve as the representatives of a magnanimous people. Nor can the agents of the ministry or the confidants of the aristocracy.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

The reality did not yet match Mirabeau's rhetoric. The new appointments that Montmorin announced on 27 March 1791 were: Louis-Philippe, comte de Ségur (Rome),\textsuperscript{23} Charles François Hurault, vicomte de Vibraye

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Quoted in Masson, 88.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Of a distinguished noble family, he was a moderate royalist. Before the Revolution he represented France in St. Petersburg. During the Revolution he was sent to Rome and Berlin after which he retired and resurfaced under the Consulate, joining the Council of State. Under the Empire he served as Napoleon's master of ceremonies but the Bourbon Restoration ended his career. Michaud, 38:673-79 and L. Apt, "Louis Philippe, comte de Ségur" in Historical Dictionary, 2: 889-90.
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(Stockholm), Comte Louis de Durfort (Venice),
Eustache René, marquis d'Osmond (St. Petersburg),
Frédéric Seraphim, marquis de La Tour du Pin-Gouvernet
(The Hague), Comte Elisabeth-Pierre Montesquiou-
Fésenac (Dresden), Marie Louise Henry, marquis
d'Escorches de Sainte-Croix (one of the few nobles who
served through the revolution) (Poland),
and Bonne-Carrère (Liège).
All were experienced diplomats and
members of the nobility. Nonetheless, these appointments
could not be considered a success; the bishop at Liège
refused to receive Bonne-Carrère just as the pope refused to
receive Ségur, and within a year Osmond had resigned
followed a few months later by Gouvernet and Vibraye.
Those who remained abroad had to demonstrate their
loyalty to the Revolution by taking yet another oath in
April 1791.

But for many diplomats it was the capture of the king

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24 He had entered the diplomatic career in 1775 and served as
minister plenipotentiary or ambassador at Stuttgart (1775), Dresden
(1784), and Copenhagen (1792). Dictionnaire de biographie française,
18:59-60; Otto Friedrich Winter, Repertorium der diplomatischen
Vertreter aller Länder, vol.3, 1764-1815 (Oldenbourg: G. Stalling,
1965), 144.

25 He had served as minister at Florence (1764), Milan and Parma
(1771-1772). A.-F. Frangulis, Dictionnaire diplomatique (Paris:
Académie diplomatique internationale, 1954), 308; Winter, 144.

26 Winter, 134 and Frangulis, 721.

27 He served as minister plenipotentiary at Liège (1782) and envoy
extraordinary at Constantinople (1793). He renounced his title during
the Revolution. See Henri-Robert, 186-88; Dictionnaire de biographie
française 12:1446-47; and Michaud, 10:447.

28 Masson, 88, 156. Also see Public Record Office (London),
Foreign Office, 27/36 for a list.

29 Archives nationales, F série administration générale de la
France, F/7 Police Générale, comité de sureté générale, comité
diplomatique, 4397, April 1791.

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after his abortive flight to Varennes (20 June 1791), his virtual imprisonment in the Tuileries, and his loss of power that created a crisis of conscience. We can see the personal dimensions of that crisis in the case of Olivier de Saint-Georges, marquis de Vérag, the king's ambassador to the Swiss Diet at Solothurn. Vérag had a distinguished military and diplomatic record and he had not forgotten the oaths that he had taken to the constitution and to the king. Vérag, faithful to his sovereign, would not serve an illegitimate government. By postponing his audience of congé, Vérag had the satisfaction of infuriating Montmorin and paralyzing the embassy for seven months.\textsuperscript{30} Others made the same painful decision: Comte Jean Jacques Fanel O'Kelly, seigneur de Lansac at Mainz,\textsuperscript{31} Friedrich Karl Willibald, Freiherr von Groschlag zu Dieburg at Darmstadt,\textsuperscript{32} Osmond accredited to St. Petersburg,\textsuperscript{33} and Comte Louis Marie Anne de Talleyrand, ambassador to Naples since 1785\textsuperscript{34} all resigned in late 1791, and Mathieu de Basquiat, baron de la Houze at Hamburg and

\textsuperscript{31} Frangulis, 783.
\textsuperscript{32} He was at the circle of the Upper Rhine (1778-1792). Bergès, 31-46, Michaud, 43:129-30, and Frangulis, 430.
\textsuperscript{33} Of an old and reputable noble family, he began his career in the army and rapidly rose to the rank of captain commandant (1771) and then "mestre de camp." In 1788 he accepted a position as ambassador and minister plenipotentiary at The Hague. He was appointed to a post at St. Petersburg but because Russia severed relations with France he never went. He resigned at the end of 1791, emigrated to Italy, and only returned to France under the Consulate. He later served Louis XVIII as ambassador at Turin and London. Henri-Robert, 280 and Michaud, 31:448.
\textsuperscript{34} Frangulis, 1072 and Winter, 139.
Copenhagen, followed in February 1792.\textsuperscript{35}

Under the Foreign Ministry of Jean Marie Claude de Valdec de Lessart (November 1791-March 1792) a wide variety of individuals served abroad. These included friends of the king, such as Marie-Gabriel-Florent-Auguste de Choiseul (called Choiseul-Gouffier), Louis-Claude Bigot de Sainte-Croix, and François Barbé de Marbois; those from "second ranks of the former diplomatic corps" such as François Barthelemy; and those committed to the Revolution, such as Ségur and Baron Armand Louis de Mackau.\textsuperscript{36} Some of the king's supporters were recalled, notably Constantin Gravier, comte de Vergennes, the minister plenipotentiary to the elector of Trier since 1787 (in November 1791), Comte Louis Cachet de Montezan, the envoy at Munich since 1780 (in December 1791),\textsuperscript{37} and Laurent Berenger, minister plenipotentiary at Ratisbon since 1786 (left January 1792).\textsuperscript{38} Upon news of his recall, Vergennes symbolically opposed the Revolution by having the elector pin a white cockade to his hat and subsequently sold diamonds worth over 300,000 francs to subsidize the émigrés.\textsuperscript{39}

Demands, however, were increasing for a purge of the diplomatic service and a reorganization of the Ministry of

\textsuperscript{35} He served as attaché in Spain (1748), chargé d'affaires in Naples (1748), minister at Rome (1762), minister at Parma (1765), and then Hamburg (1772-1779) and Denmark (1779-1792). Frangulis, 501.

\textsuperscript{36} Henri-Robert, 19.

\textsuperscript{37} Dictionnaire de biographie française, 7:781.

\textsuperscript{38} He had also served as chargé d'affaires at Russia (1762-1765), at Vienna (1766-1767), Sicily (1769-1770, 1771-1772), the United Provinces (intermittently from 1778 to 1785), and Parma (1785). Winter, 113, 116, 126, 129, 132, and 139 and Frangulis, 92.

\textsuperscript{39} He did not return to France until 1802 when he discovered that all of his property had been sold. Bergès, 41, note 33; Michaud, 43: 154.
Foreign Affairs. Condorcet echoed those sentiments when he argued that France had to "return to the nation its dignity among foreign powers." To do that ambassadors should be "chosen among those celebrated in the annals of liberty."\(^{40}\) The *Moniteur* urged the dismissal of all employees of the old regime such as Marquis Charles Alexis Brulart de Sillery, comte de Genlis, a deputy in the National Convention. The "reign of the protected spies is over," he contended. The new representatives of France should be "pure and simple."\(^{41}\)

It was in such an atmosphere that Charles François Dupérier, known as Dumouriez, was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs (15 March-15 June 1792). His appointment and the outbreak of war on 20 April 1792 precipitated drastic changes in the diplomatic corps. Unfortunately Dumouriez remained Minister of Foreign Affairs for about three months, enough time to inflict considerable damage.\(^{42}\) He had concluded that prompt and total change was needed in the diplomatic corps. Ministers in foreign courts, he asserted, carried the "colors" of aristocracy and did not profess the principles of revolution and liberty. He acknowledged that many of them were capable diplomats—but in the old system. To the argument that such a complete transformation would result in placing inexperienced individuals in foreign courts, he rejoined that France's new interests were simple and that France had rejected the intrigues, the corruption, the vain mysteries and puerilities that had characterized the diplomacy of the old regime. Just as France changed its political system so France should

\(^{40}\) Quoted in Masson, 114.
\(^{41}\) Quoted in Ibid., 154
\(^{42}\) Bergès, 41, note 33; Masson, 151-81.
change its representatives.\footnote{Charles François Dumouriez, Mémoire sur le ministère des affaires étrangères (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1791).}

Dumouriez's policies triggered some resignations, such as that of Emmanuel Marie Louis, marquis de Noailles,\footnote{He had served as ambassador to the United Provinces and to Great Britain (1776-1778), was incarcerated during the Terror, and after Thermidor retired to his chateau. Frangulis, 770-1 and Winter, 114, 118.} the ambassador at Vienna since 1783. Dumouriez also ignited several diplomatic crises by refusing to follow established etiquette. For example, at the court of Turin it was customary to propose individuals as ambassadors before they were named, but he did not observe this courtesy. Had he vetted Charles-Louis Huguet de Semonville beforehand, he would have avoided the crisis that ensued when the court at Turin refused to allow Semonville, whom they regarded as a radical Jacobin, into the country. Semonville's sporting of a hat decorated with an enormous tricolor cockade when he reached the border had done nothing but cement the court's certitude.\footnote{Armand François comte d'Allonville, Mémoires tirés des papiers d'un homme d'état sur les causes secrètes qui ont déterminé la politique des cabinets dans la guerre de la révolution depuis 1792 jusqu'en 1815, 13 vols. (Paris: L.G. Michaud, 1828-38) 1:350; Dumouriez, La Vie et les mémoires, 2: 201; and James Harris, Earl of Malmesbury, Diaries and Correspondence of James Harris, First Earl of Malmesbury, 4 vols. (London: R. Bentley, 1844) 2:444.}

Shortly after Dumouriez's appointment, the king acknowledged (24 March 1792) that in the past he had chosen principled, honest men as his representatives but now that so many had resigned he had the duty to replace them with men "accredited by their popular opinions."\footnote{Masson, 177.} All of the officials whom Dumouriez and Bonne-Carrère
appointed were Jacobins or cronies or both. Marquis Bernard François Chauvelin who was dispatched to London as minister plenipotentiary, for example, was a personal friend of Dumouriez and an individual whom the king regarded as too dangerous to leave in France.

We can also see the effect of these policies on the diplomatic service abroad in the fate of Mathieu Joseph Gandolphe who first worked in the ministry in the finance section. He was promoted to secretary of the legation at Hamburg (1787) and later chargé d'affaires at Hamburg and Bremen (1790-1792). Gandolphe was not a member of a noble or illustrious family; his origins were humble, and his father had been a wood seller. But he too was snared in the hunt for royalist sympathizers. The Gandolphe case shows that not even those from the "secondary ranks" were secure. Gandolphe was one of many who was forced out without any indemnity or pension and shortly thereafter arrested and imprisoned in the Abbaye.\footnote{Henri-Robert, 191 and Winter, 138.} Dumouriez's policies would have been even more disastrous had it not been for the outbreak of war which greatly reduced the number of envoys abroad. From April 1792 onward, France, at war with more and more European countries, had need of fewer representatives.

Dumouriez's successors, Victor Scipion Louis Joseph de la Garde, marquis de Chambonas (17 June-23 July 1792), and Bigot de Sainte-Croix (1-10 August 1792) only stayed in office a short time and were increasingly frustrated as more and more power devolved to the Convention.\footnote{Corneliu S. Blaga, L'Evolution de la diplomatie (Paris: Pedone, 1938), 447.} Although all of the king's ministers resigned on 10 July 1792 with the exception of Chambonas, he lasted only a short while longer. He presented a dire
overview of France's relations with the rest of the world, concluding with the memorable phrase: "We have many enemies, few certain allies, even fewer friends."49

This sense of isolation only increased after the revolution of 10 August 1792 and the overthrow of the monarchy for many more diplomats resigned under the ministry of Pierre-Henri-Hélène-Marie Lebrun, who served from 10 August 1792 to 21 June 1793. Those who tendered their resignations included Maisonneuve at Wurttemberg, Choiseul-Gouffier at Constantinople, Vibraye at Copenhagen,50 Yves Louis Joseph Hirsinger, chargé d'affaires at the Grison League, Bernard (Bennis' secretary in Rome), and La Tour du Pin-Gouvernet at The Hague. After the execution of the king, many governments, most notably Britain, Spain, the United Provinces, Prussia, and the Hanseatic league, expelled the few representatives who remained.

After September 1793 when the Committee of Public Safety adopted the Hébertist war policy (guerre à outrance), the French needed fewer representatives for negotiations with the enemy and diplomatic relations virtually ceased. The committee dealt only with other democratic republics, that is, the United States and Switzerland. To others France would send only secret agents, secretaries of legations, and chargés d'affaires.51 By 1794 France had only ten agents abroad and only Geneva,

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49 Masson, 195.
50 He was condemned as an émigré. He returned to France at the first Restoration and was named honorary lieutenant general. Dictionnaire de biographie française 18: 59-60.
Malta, and Denmark had representatives in France.  

Just as the Committee of Public Safety and the Thermidorian grappled with the issue of appointments so too did the Directory. The Directory did re-establish the department of Foreign Affairs and appointed Charles Delacroix (1795-97), Talleyrand (1797-99), and Charles Frédéric Reinhard (July-November 1799) as ministers. Both Talleyrand and Reinhard tried to reestablish the prestige of the ministry and of its representatives. In a candid conversation on 16 June 1798 Talleyrand complained about France's envoys. He was both dispirited and alarmed when he noted that France only had "fools" abroad. Pierre Louis Guinguené at Turin staged ridiculous scenes, Garat at Naples had become the laughing stock of Europe, P.-J.-Marie Sotin de la Coindière at Genoa made ill advised decisions as did Charles de Delacroix de Constant at The Hague. Talleyrand complained that the Directory only wanted to employ former members of the Convention—and he could have added that some of them were regicides. The result was that Europeans abhorred the French republic. As late as 1799 ideological considerations or the desire to appoint cronies or generals rather than talented or experienced diplomats still dominated nominations. After the coups of Floréal, Fructidor, and Prairial the Directory purged the diplomatic lists. For example, Pierre Louis Ginguené at Turin was dismissed and Sotin at Genoa was relegated to the political

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52 The replacement for Gouverneur Morris, the United States representative, had not yet arrived. Masson, 287.
53 Henri-Robert, 15.
54 Masson, 445-500.
wilderness in Charleston.\textsuperscript{56} By 1799 one of the most illustrious diplomatic services in Europe had been reduced by the Revolution to but a vestige of its former self.

\textsuperscript{56} Martyn Lyons, \textit{France under the Directory} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 207.