Politics, Protest, and Violence in Revolutionary Bordeaux, 1789–1794

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Revolutionary Bordeaux has proven to be something of an enigma for historians. Jacques Cavignac, Anne de Mathan, and others have suggested that Bordeaux's transition from Old Regime to Revolution was relatively smooth and peaceful. As the instruments of absolutist government at the local level were swept away, merchants, traders, businessmen, and lawyers—those who had experimented with democracy and Enlightenment sociability in the city's Musée and Masonic lodges prior to 1789—assumed the reins of power on the municipal, departmental, and national levels. Therefore, while many departments and other cities were experiencing vicious conflicts between moderates and radicals struggling for control of local governments, a "placid stability" reigned in Bordeaux.


Yet after 1793 Bordeaux descended into chaos and witnessed some of the worst and most notorious acts of violence of the Revolutionary era. Between the autumn of 1793 and Thermidor, Bordeaux's Jacobins persecuted anyone deemed sympathetic to the Girondin cause. The church and clergy in particular became targets of ruthless acts of dechristianization, including intimidation, iconoclasm, arbitrary arrests, and sometimes murder. Directorial Bordeaux was perhaps even more turbulent as marauding bands of monarchists carried out a systematic campaign of terror, including beatings, shootings, and murders of former and neo-Jacobins.

How and why, then, did Bordeaux transform itself from a peaceful and tranquil provincial capital during the first years of the Revolution into a hotbed of revolutionary violence after 1793? Recent studies have suggested that the failed federalist revolt, the imposition of the Terror, and the execution of local Girondin leaders destroyed the ideological cohesion of the city and created a political vacuum filled by Jacobins and monarchists interested in power, personal recriminations, and retribution. In this article I hope to demonstrate that there was no "placid stability" in Bordeaux before the Terror. Rather, the political culture of the city was marked by deep ideological rifts between its elected officials and members of newly created

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3 Pierre Bécamps, "Le club national de Bordeaux. Analyse des procès-verbaux des deliberations du 23 Octobre 1793 au août 1794" (Thèse secondaire, Université de Bordeaux, 1951); Kenneth R. Fenster, "De-Christianizers and De-Christianization in the Gironde During The Year II," (PhD diss., Marquette University, 1993); Forrest, Society and Politics, 227-53; Brace, Bordeaux and the Gironde, 220-43.


5 Anne de Mathan, Girondins jusqu'au tombeau, 153; Hanson, The Jacobin Republic, 90-98.
political clubs. The subsequent federalist revolt and the Terror only exacerbated these rifts, resulting in further violence and political polarization. By shedding light on the early years of the Revolution in Bordeaux, we can better grasp the nature of local politics and the centrality of violence to the revolutionary dynamic.

The Revolution in Bordeaux began on 17 July 1789 when news of the storming of the Bastille arrived from Paris. The Bordelais responded with enthusiasm and quickly adopted the revolutionary cockade and colors. Crowds of forty thousand men and women gathered in the Jardin Publique to listen to speeches, cheer patriotic sentiments, and hail the new era that they believed had begun. The royal governing institution of the city, the jurade, was disbanded; in its place sat the Ninety Electors, a body which had only months earlier selected Bordeaux's representatives from the Third Estate to the Estates General. Once in office, the Ninety Electors faced a question that would confound and preoccupy municipal leaders throughout the early years of the Revolution in Bordeaux: How could the gains of the Revolution be preserved while preventing lawlessness and disorder? The immediate response was to create a National Guard, which was charged with the duties of protecting property from the crowd and protecting the gains of the Revolution from monarchists.

In a speech calling for the formation of the Guard, Jean-Baptise Boyer-Fonfrède, the young merchant and future Girondin leader of the National Convention, voiced the contradictory impulses of the city's new leadership. "It is not enough," he argued, "to grieve upon the tombs of our dear brothers in Paris, it is necessary to avenge them. We must arm! Peace and tranquility must be our first consideration, never

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While vengeance and tranquility are strange rallying cries, the speech captures the dual concerns of Bordeaux's new elites: enthusiasm for revolution coupled with fear of disorder and violence. Nearly twelve thousand propertied and literate young men responded to Boyer-Fonfrède's call to arms.

Bordeaux's workers also greeted the start of the Revolution with a mixture of enthusiasm for its promise and a fear of a royal reaction. Equally important, they worried about a return of bread shortages, which had periodically plagued the city over the course of the eighteenth century. These fears crystallized around the medieval royal fortress of Chateau Trompette, called the "Bastille of Bordeaux." Built in 1453 and significantly enlarged after the Fronde, Chateau Trompette served as a massive—and for some—unwelcome symbol of royal power. It also proved to be a tempting target for those Bordeaux workers afraid of a royal insurrection and anxious about the supply of bread. By August 1789, rumors circulated that royal troops garrisoned at Trompette were mining the approach to the fortress and waiting for orders from the king to reduce the city to rubble. Other rumors warned of royalist sympathizers ready to take control of the fortress and bring the Revolution to an abrupt halt. In response, the city's workers hatched a plan to seize the fortress, secure its cache of weapons, and liberate the grain and flour that was rumored to be stockpiled inside.

In their recent book on the Bastille, Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink and Rolf Reichardt have demonstrated that workers in other provincial cities throughout France had similar designs on their

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10 Lhéritier, *Les débuts de la revolution à Bordeaux*, 78.
own, local Bastilles. In Brest, for example, a crowd of two thousand workers attacked that city's royal fortress, plundered the weapon stocks, and declared themselves the "parti du Tiers État." Similar revolts occurred in Nantes, Lyon, and Marseilles.

The Ninety Electors hoped to prevent in Bordeaux what had occurred weeks earlier in Paris. In contrast to other provincial capitals, the National Guard in Bordeaux was sent not to liberate the royal fortress nor to confront the armed garrison of royal troops. Rather, the Guard worked cooperatively with royal forces in order to secure the cache of weapons and prevent them from falling into the hands of the people. The royal garrison commander, the Comte de Fumel, turned over the keys to the fortress to Boyer-Fonfrède without a fight. The rifles and ammunition at the fort were distributed among the Guard, and the cannons were removed and secured.

Thus, from the beginning, both the threat and suppression of violence were at the core of the revolutionary dynamic in Bordeaux. The city's new leaders sought to safeguard the Revolution while at the same time preserving order and protecting property. In the wake of the storming of the Bastille and its imitators throughout the country, the editors of the radical Parisian newspaper Révolutions de Paris wrote, "every city, every small market town seems to regret not having cut off any heads, not having conquered a Bastille." The propertied classes and ruling elites of Bordeaux, however, showed no such regret. Indeed, just months later in January 1790, the Bordelais elected the seventy-year-old former garrison commander of Trompette, the Comte de Fumel, as their first mayor of the revolutionary period.

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12 Ibid.
13 Brace, Bordeaux and the Gironde, 27-29.
14 Quoted in Lüsebrink and Reichardt, The Bastille, 171.
15 Hunt, Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution, 185.
In addition to Fumel's electoral success, the first elections in Bordeaux also witnessed the elevation of a small group of wealthy, young elites to positions of power throughout the city.\textsuperscript{16} Bordeaux's overseas merchants and traders, lawyers, financiers, and shipbuilders dominated elections to the municipal council and other city-wide elective offices.\textsuperscript{17} They also comprised the membership of the city's most important political club, the Société des Amis de la Constitution.\textsuperscript{18} When it came time to elect representatives to the Legislative and National Convention, they chose merchants and lawyers who had honed their political instincts in the Amis, the municipal council, and the National Guard.\textsuperscript{19}

From their initial ascent to power in 1789 until the Terror came to Bordeaux in 1793, the new ruling elites believed that laws, legally propagated, must be obediently followed in order to maintain good domestic government. Abraham Furtado, a wealthy Jewish merchant and member of the municipal council, argued in a 1791 pamphlet that the role of elected officials was to maintain public order and suppress those who disturb it.\textsuperscript{20} "Liberty is not the right to do all that one wishes," Furtado argued, "but rather to not do that which one should not. Liberty constituted under law compels a religious respect for it, both from the magistrates who order and the Citizen who obeys."\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{16} See Jacques Cavignac, "À la recherche des Girondins obscures," 325-30; Anne de Mathan, Girondins jusqu'au tombeau, 12-44; Forrest, Society and Politics, 30-61.
\textsuperscript{17} Forrest, Society and Politics, 62-87.
\textsuperscript{18} Mathan, Girondins, 75-81, 91-93; Forrest, Society and Politics, especially chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{19} Forrest, Society and Politics, 62-87.
\textsuperscript{21} Archives départementales de la Gironde, Bordeaux, 8J366, Abraham Furtado, "Réflexions sur les Clubs ou Sociétés d'Amis de la Constitution." Also see Hanson, Jacobin Republic Under Fire, 161-65, and Anne de Mathan, Mémoires de Terreur: L'an II à Bordeaux (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2002), 59-122.
Furtado's argument is significant when we consider electoral participation and the polity in Bordeaux from 1790 to 1793. Election laws during the first years of the Revolution guaranteed that that the great majority of people in Bordeaux could not participate in either the electoral or legislative process. Only active citizens or those who could pay the equivalent of three days' wages could vote, while those who could pay ten days' wages could stand for public office. In theory, active citizenship laws guaranteed that only the wealthiest Bordelais would participate in the political and governing process. In practice, only 8 percent of citizens in Bordeaux voted in the first municipal election of 1790. The reality, then, was that Furtado and the municipal council expected the great majority of citizens to have respect for laws despite being legally denied the right to participate in their creation.22

Bordeaux's workers did not, however, remain aloof from politics, nor did they cede political leadership to the city's new ruling class. Just four days after receiving news of the fall of the Bastille, Bordeaux's workers came together and founded Café du Club National, the first political club in Bordeaux during the Revolutionary period.23 The Café du Club National differed markedly from the Amis in both sociology and sentiment. Pierre Bécamps has demonstrated that membership in it consisted almost entirely of Bordeaux's lesser merchants, artisans, shopkeepers, and teachers.24 Thus, the Club provided a social and political base for those who were unable to join the Amis

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because of the prohibitively high membership dues and who were unable to vote because of active citizenship laws.

Members of the Club had little in common with the wealthy merchants, lawyers, and financiers of the Amis and municipal council. Michael Kennedy has described the ideology of the Club National as "rabidly Montagnard," and, indeed, there was a strong agreement of views between members of the Club National in Bordeaux and the Jacobins in Paris. The primary question dividing the Girondins and Montagnards in Bordeaux was the legitimacy of violence in achieving political ends. While the municipal council, their allies in the Amis, and their deputies in the National Convention highly suspected mob violence, members of the Club National believed that violence was the engine of Revolutionary progress. In the wake of the September Massacres, for example, Pierre Vergniaud denounced the Parisian crowd as a "violent mob of assassins." In contrast, members of the Club National praised the Parisians for their revolutionary zeal and enthusiasm.

In Bordeaux, events both local and national combined to create a milieu for the competing ideological claims and political ambitions of the Club National and the municipal council. The political dynamic between the two groups remained remarkably static during the first years of the Revolution. As city officials sought to maintain a climate of peace and stability, members of the Club National employed illegal and extra-legal means, including instigating violence, in order to destabilize the city's ruling elites.

The first issue pitting city leaders against members of the Club National was the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. In Bordeaux, nearly half of the clergy refused to swear an oath of loyalty to the new French constitution. Members of both the

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26 Forrest, *Society and Politics*, 74-75.
Amis and the Club National ardently supported the Civil Constitution and uniformly denounced refractory priests. The two groups differed, however, on how best to enforce the new laws. Members of the Club called for the arrest of all non-jurors, denouncing them as unpatriotic fanatics and enemies of the Revolution. The municipal council agreed to close all churches served by refractory clergy, but argued that mass arrests would be too disruptive to Bordelais society.

Tensions ran high in Bordeaux throughout the summer of 1792. In May, a mob attacked six refractory priests, and only the intervention of the National Guard saved their lives. Later that month, two refractory priests were arrested but acquitted of charges. Members of the Club were outraged by the acquittal and began a vitriolic writing campaign against the two priests. On 15 July 1792, a drunken Bordelais mob seized the priests, murdered them, cut off their heads, staked them atop pikes, and paraded the heads through the city. Members of the Club National quickly defended the actions of the mob and warned that a similar fate awaited other non-jurors. In contrast, members of the municipal council and Amis denounced the mob for its violent crime and the Club National for bringing Parisian-style violence to Bordeaux.

Non-juring priests were not the only targets of the Club. After 1790, the city's bakers also became the objects of scorn, harassment, and violence. Bread shortages and bread riots were not new to Bordeaux. The years leading up to 1773, for example, witnessed a series of bad harvests that resulted in the outbreak of violence throughout the city. During the

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revolutionary period, members of the Club National exploited fears of bread shortages and instigated riots in order to sow discontent and destabilize the municipal council. Richard Brace has argued that this strategy was the most effective political weapon that members of the Club National could wield against city officials. According to the Club's propaganda, the city's ruling elites were guilty of inefficiency, greed, and neglect.

On 24 July 1791, Bordeaux experienced its first bread riots of the revolutionary period. Rioters entered several bakeries in the city center where they discovered moldy bread in the cellars. Exhibiting the rotted bread to the mob of hungry onlookers, the crowd quickly erupted into violence. The National Guard eventually quieted the rioters and restored peace. In the aftermath, the municipal council conducted an inquiry into the riot and found that the moldy bread was never intended for sale. The report suggested that the bread was planted in the shops by provocateurs from the Club National.

City officials understood that rising bread prices represented a fundamental threat to public order. During the first years of the Revolution, the municipal council took steps to keep prices artificially low, including giving direct subsidies to bakers. By 1793, however, with the city deeply in debt, the council announced plans to replace subsidies with block grants to Bordeaux's twenty-eight districts. The new plan called for district leaders to distribute money directly to the neediest citizens with the goal of saving the city money while still providing a necessary service to the poor.

The announcement brought widespread panic. On 8 March 1793, violence erupted once again in Bordeaux. An angry crowd comprised primarily of women gathered in the city center. Marching towards the Hôtel de Ville, the group smashed windows and threw rocks at the National Guard. The Guard opened fire and killed one protestor. It was clear that members of the Club National had not only incited the crowd to riot, but also took an active role in the rampage. Eye witnesses reported men

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dressed as women leading the crowd into confrontation with the National Guard. François-Armand Saige, mayor of Bordeaux, accused the group of fostering ”Maratism” and for being ”political agitators.” The day after the riot, city officials closed down the Club, declared the group illegal, and impounded its records. Jeanne Melchior has demonstrated that, despite the closing, Club members continued to meet secretly and redoubled their efforts to overthrow Bordeaux's political leadership.33

Bordeaux's revolt against the Convention during the summer of 1793 provided the impetus for the final clash between the city's ruling elites and the members of the Club National. On 2 June 1793, the Parisian National Guard and a crowd of twenty thousand surrounded the National Convention building and demanded the arrest of the Girondins. Ultimately, twenty-nine Girondin deputies to the Convention were proscribed and placed under house arrest. Seven of the deputies came from Bordeaux. The news stunned the Bordelais. Not only had they suffered a profound loss of political representation, but it had come at the hands of an armed and violent mob. City officials responded to the news by declaring Bordeaux in revolt against the authority of the National Convention.34 City leaders wrote letters to the Convention demanding the reinstatement of their deputies. ”We are immediately organizing half of our national guards,” one letter warned, ”we will send them to Paris . . . and we pledge to save our representatives or die on their tombs.”35

Municipal leaders failed miserably, however, in their threats "to hurl" an army at Paris and save their deputies. In the end, a mere four hundred troops were raised, and they never traveled farther than the town of Langon, just thirty miles outside of Bordeaux. While the Bordelais were unable to use violence to defend their cause, the Montagnards in Paris and their allies in the Club National showed no such reluctance. In August 1793,

34 The best recent work in English on the Federalist Revolt is Hanson, The Jacobin Republic Under Fire, especially 125-31, 160-61.
35 Quoted in Hanson, Jacobin Republic Under Fire, 22.
an army of two thousand men dispatched from Paris surrounded Bordeaux. Their goal was to starve out the Bordelais in order to foment rebellion within the city. Members of the Club National coordinated their efforts with the Convention's two deputies-on-mission. "Fear and Flour" became their rallying cry—fear for those who sided with the municipal council and flour for those who sided with the Club.36

On 17 September, a crowd stormed the Hôtel de Ville and finally toppled the municipal council. The mercantile and legal elites that had ruled the city from the first days of the Revolution were once again out of power. In October, the Club National was declared the sole legal political club of the city, the law of the maximum was imposed, and girondisme and negociantisme became new crimes of the Revolution. In Bordeaux as in other former federalist strongholds, merchants were declared "the enemies of equality," and commerce was denounced as "usurious, monarchical and anti-revolutionary."37

Joseph Bertrand, president of the Club National and a clockmaker, was named the new mayor of Bordeaux. Printers, butchers, hat makers, locksmiths, and sailors assumed the reins of city government at all levels.38 A military commission led by Jean-Baptiste Lacombe, a leader of the Club National, was created to implement the Terror in Bordeaux. In the ultimate act of Revolutionary violence, the entire apparatus of municipal leadership, including the wealthy merchants, lawyers, and financiers of the Amis, were executed.39

In The Jacobin Republic Under Fire, Paul Hanson has argued that the ideological clash between the Girondins and the Montagnards centered around competing notions of sovereignty. According to Hanson, Robespierre and the Montagnards

36 Quoted in Brace, Bordeaux and the Gironde, 213.
38 Bécamps, La Révolution à Bordeaux, 52.
39 For a complete list of those killed during the Terror in Bordeaux, see A. Vivie, Histoire de la Terreur à Bordeaux (Bordeaux, 1877).
believed in popular democracy and the right of the people, particularly passive citizens, to participate directly in the political process. The Girondins and their allies in the provinces, on the other hand, believed that the people ceded sovereignty to their elected officials, who served in legally constituted assemblies such as the Legislative Assembly in Paris and the municipal council in Bordeaux. Hanson's argument is worthwhile and has helped to refocus the Montagnard-Girondin schism. In Bordeaux, however, the series of confrontations between the municipal council and members of the Club National involved more than merely questions of sovereignty. They also revealed deep fissures between members of the propertied elites and workers.

The two sides disagreed on more than just political philosophy. The tactics used by the municipal council and the members of the Club National reveal a markedly divergent Revolutionary temperament. For members of the Club, those denied the right to participate in the political process, violence was a legitimate and effective political tool. In contrast, Furtado's hope that the people would have a "religious respect" for laws was, in hindsight, naïve. The beheading of two refractory priests ought to have made clear that the crowd, spurred on by members of the Club National, would mete out revolutionary justice if the city's elected officials failed to do so. After the expulsion and arrest of their deputies in the National Convention, city leaders were perhaps most justified in the use of violence, but they could only offer a tepid response. Between the years 1789 and 1793, municipal authorities could neither prevent violence by the Club National nor employ it to save their representatives or themselves. In the end, the desire for a revolution without violence in Bordeaux was simply untenable.