Murder in Aubagne

Lynching, Law, and Justice during the French Revolution

This is a study of factions, lynching, murder, terror, and counterterror during the French Revolution. It examines factionalism in small towns like Aubagne near Marseille, and how this produced the murders and prison massacres of 1795–1798. Another major theme is the convergence of lynching from below with official terror from above. Although the Terror may have been designed to solve a national emergency in the spring of 1793, in southern France it permitted one faction to continue a struggle against its enemies, a struggle that had begun earlier over local issues like taxation and governance. This study uses the techniques of microhistory to tell the story of the small town of Aubagne. It then extends the scope to places nearby like Marseille, Arles, and Aix-en-Provence. Along the way, it illuminates familiar topics like the activity of clubs and revolutionary tribunals and then explores largely unexamined areas like lynching, the sociology of factions, the emergence of theories of violent fraternal democracy, and the nature of the White Terror.

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A simple tic makes us insupportable to those who see us close up every day, not counting the thirst for independence and superiority, this incurable social wound. . . . Domestic quarrels, face-to-face disagreements, village antipathies all come from that. . . . Now these hatreds, so to speak, are endemic to small places and they doubled with intensity when the revolutionary wind fueled them. That is easy to understand: in the village, people are as narrow as their space. All Provence was thus infected in the wink of an eye; the most humble church tower had its club, its sedition mongers [*boutefeux*] and its victims.

– Laurent Lautard, *Esquisses historiques: Marseille depuis 1789 jusqu'en 1815; par un vieux Marseillais*

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Preface

When I discovered the *grande affaire d'Aubagne* in the archives in Paris and Marseille, I thought this was a perfect opportunity to explore a genre I had admired for a long time, the microhistory. The *affaire* recounted a series of sensational revenge murders in the small town of Aubagne (population between seven thousand and eight thousand) near Marseille in 1795. The documentation in the trial dossier was huge. Two of the three major criteria of the genre, an event with a powerful narrative element and abundant sources, could be satisfied. Meeting the third criterion, the transition from the narrative to reflections on the broad significance, was another matter. The story of the murder gang in Aubagne was obviously about violence and mayhem in the French Revolution, but how it fitted with the larger picture was problematic. Concentrating on a single series of murders in one town at a particular time left a lot out. As I explored from the murders of 1795 backward into the town's earlier history and outward into the Department of the Bouches-du-Rhône and to Provence, the projected book began to turn into something else. A great deal of Aubagne's history is incomprehensible without an understanding of the broader context of the town's history and its relation to its region. The murder gang of 1795 turned out to be the end result of a factional struggle that began with the Revolution itself in 1789. Moreover, the gang was a retaliation for a particularly extreme form of Jacobinism that was ubiquitous throughout the Midi.

This changed the format of the book from microhistory to something more like the traditional regional monograph. But the context required some revisions to the traditional format of the monograph. The central problem in the history of the French Revolution in the Midi emerged

as the nature of local Jacobinism. However, the evidence pointed away from the standard interpretations of extremist Jacobinism. These represent Jacobinism as a product of the radicalism of the Enlightenment or as a response to the twin crises of war and internal insurrection. For all that the Jacobins of the Midi considered themselves as belonging to a national and international movement, local, not generic, factors gave their political culture its specific shape.

Examining Jacobinism raises another problem, that of the crowd. Crowd action here did not fit any of the existing paradigms either. Subsistence issues were not so central as taxation, hope, hatred of enemies, vengeance, preemption, and punishment. The Revolution in this region drew a lot of its support from peasants and from urban working people, yet the common explanations of ordinary people's politicization did not work. Here were peasants who were not particularly antiseigneurial (although they certainly hated aristocrats), and here were artisans who were not obsessed with the rising price of bread. Jacobins and ordinary people were drawn into politics in other ways. The breakdown of the old order in 1789 allowed ordinary people to express age-old peasant ideals of a just community. At first, they demanded a more equitable tax system. But, because taxes were closely linked to local political structures, they simultaneously challenged the authority of the elite families. Once the Constituent Assembly adopted representative forms of local government and guaranteed freedom of assembly and petition, old ideals acquired the more modern-sounding language of Jacobin rural democracy. Ordinary people stayed in politics because the Revolution opened up political spaces that allowed these groups to raise their sights and expectations of what the outcome of Revolution could be. Jacobin utopianism was a product of success. Rising expectations produced an extraordinarily violent politics, one in which fears of foreign enemies definitely mattered, but in which the relationship of external crisis to violent action was much more complicated than an older literature generally allows.

The models of the relations between crowds and political leaders that are part of the literature do not fit either. Although interpretations vary, many historians argue that the crowd imposed violent policies on otherwise-reluctant Jacobins who went along to forestall an even worse violence.[1] This assumes that crowds and Jacobins were different people. The experience of Aubagne and many larger centers shows, however,

[1] Roger Dupuy, *La république jacobine: terreur, guerre et gouvernement révolutionnaire, 1792–1794*, *Nouvelle histoire de la France contemporaine*; 2 (Paris: Seuil, 2005), 301–302.

that the composition of each group overlapped considerably. Jacobins and crowds were aspects of a common movement. Some members of that movement held formal office, but their public positions did not tame them. Urban and small-town elites were divided here as bitterly as they were anywhere, but one of the defining characteristics of the elite who endorsed the Jacobins was the attitude to violence. Such individuals could be ambivalent, apologetic, or even enthusiastic supporters, but in the end, they were never willing to suppress this expression of the popular will. By the time of the Terror, violence was no longer even an episodic occurrence, to be tolerated so long as it remained in the past. Instead, it was a strategy to annihilate an enemy who blocked the construction of a tranquil community in the future. Presenting the leadership as reluctant to embrace violence is, therefore, misleading. Although the leaders' attitudes varied with time, revolutionary institutions, the press, the clubs, and even official and terrorist organs of government frequently exalted in their violent rhetoric and action. Examples of Jacobins reluctant to practice violent politics are very hard to find in big cities like Marseille and other regional centers. A common assumption in the literature that a penchant for violence correlates with social class or degrees of wealth is also unworkable. Middle-class Jacobins could be as extremist as anyone could imagine. By the time national politics had embraced the concept of revolutionary government, in the autumn of 1793, the parameters of permissible violence were very wide indeed.

Justifications for violence as the vengeance of the people emerged early here, as they did among extremists in Paris.[2] Yet, the violence of the murder gangs and the killers of prisoners in 1795 and after worked in a comparable fashion. Revenge and punishment in the name of a ruptured community was an uncanny echo of Jacobin justifications of violence.

These considerations of how the national, regional, and local revolutions interacted affected the decisions about how to present the material. The narrative oscillates back and forth from the history of Aubagne to that of the region. Sometimes, the regional has to be examined in depth before returning to the particular, and, sometimes, the struggles in a small town have to dominate.

[2] Colin Lucas, "Revolutionary Violence, the People and the Terror," in *The Terror*, ed. Keith Michael Baker, *The French Revolution and the creation of modern political culture* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1994), 57–79. See also his "The Crowd and Politics between 'Ancien Regime' and Revolution in France," *Journal of Modern History* 60, no. 3 (1988), 421–457, which emphasizes the crowd's role in imposing community norms. My argument relates to the crowd as an expression of faction.

If Aubagne was not very different from other places in terms of its extremism, it follows that an understanding of its factionalism throws light on factionalism elsewhere. A thorough prosopography of the factions is only possible in one place, not because these relations are so complex, but because it is very time consuming to uncover them. Linking various bits of biographical data about hundreds of individuals requires a thorough soaking in the local archives. Extending that to other small towns and cities would be a vast enterprise.

Moreover, the results of this minute research showed that other explanations that social-cultural historians frequently deploy must be laid aside. A working hypothesis in the historian's toolbox is that social structure determines consciousness. Another is that preexisting cultural predispositions or heritages determine action. Social and cultural issues certainly matter, but it is impossible to see how they matter without having a clear idea of what we are trying to discover. Thus the importance of establishing a clear narrative. Thus the importance too of connecting the small spokes of Aubagne to the large wheels of Marseille, the Bouches-du-Rhône, and even Provence.

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Abbreviations

AC	Archives communales
AD	Archives départementales
ADBR	Archives départementales des Bouches-du-Rhône
AhRf	*Annales historiques de la Révolution française*
AM	Archives municipales
AN	Archives nationales
AP	*Archives parlementaires*
Aulard, *RACSP*	F.A. Aulard, *Recueil des actes du Comité de Salut public*
BM	Bibliothèque municipale
CSP	Comité de Salut public
JdM	*Journal des départements méridionaux*
NYPL	New York Public Library
Rf	*Révolution française*
SP	Société populaire