

H-France Forum, Volume 5, Issue 3 (Summer 2010), No. 4

D. M. G. Sutherland, *Murder in Aubagne: Lynching, Law, and Justice during the French Revolution*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xvii + 316 pp. Figures, notes, appendix, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-521-88304-7.

Review Essay by Alan Forrest, University of York

Donald Sutherland has over the years written prolifically about the French Revolution, both at national and at regional level, investigating in particular counter-revolution and anti-revolution as they affected Brittany and the West. He is as well aware as anyone of the importance of regional identity, religious devotion and inter-communal rivalry in stoking local passions and exciting animosities against neighbours and outsiders. In local communities in Brittany he has analyzed tensions sufficiently intractable to drive whole provinces to insurrection and civil war. Whole communities were purged, whole families massacred by passing armies or by the agents of a terrorist state. But even in the West violence was never as deeply engrained in society as the violence that is encountered in the Southeast of France, in the bandit country of the Drôme and the Vaucluse, the Gard and the Bouches-du-Rhône, where the politics of Jacobinism and anti-Jacobinism, of radicalism and conservatism, was played out with seeming relish, the battles of one generation passed to their sons and grandsons as the state-sponsored Terror of 1793 gave way to more individual and factional White Terror in 1795 or even, in some instances, after 1815. Here whole communities were torn apart by hatreds and factional animosities that passed effortlessly from generation to generation. In a world dominated by clan politics and family vendettas political divisions acquired a deeply personal tinge. In the name of Jacobinism or the Catholic Church, federalism or the Thermidorian republic, this was a region where, it seemed, national politics blended with local faction to produce extreme and unforgiving violence, with many hundreds of local people left dead, victims of lynching and nocturnal attacks as much as of revolutionary justice and the guillotine.

This phenomenon of southern violence is well-known. It was the subject of an influential essay by Colin Lucas in the *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* in 1978, and aspects of it have been examined more recently by, among others, Howard Brown and Stephen Clay.^[1] Republican politics have been linked to patterns of violence and vendetta in various cities and departments of the South, from the Gard (Gwynne Lewis) to the Vaucluse (Martine Lapiéd) and the Bouches-du-Rhône (Jacques Guillaumou).^[2] But these studies cover wide areas of terrain; they discuss the incidence and impact of killing and hint at the ways in which factions operated, but few lower their gaze to the level of individual murders. What Donald Sutherland does here is to take a single southern town, Aubagne, and study the sociology of violence in compelling detail, a violence that sold itself as political but which was deeply embedded in the life of the community. There were few regions where republicans denounced one another with such vigour, or where political opposition was met with such savagery. But what did this violence mean? Who killed whom, and why? Should it be interpreted as a symptom of political extremism or as a reflection of extreme factional divisions in a society where family loyalties ran deep and a sense of outraged honour could easily turn a man's thoughts to murder and vengeance? This is the central research question of Sutherland's book. It is, of course, the problem of a whole region rather than of any single city; but by studying Aubagne he searches for insights that will allow him to explain

southern violence more generally. He has the space to reconstruct the factions and murder gangs that were such an enduring part of the landscape and suggests explanations for their persistence, their cruelty, even their blood-lust.

Aubagne, it turns out, offers a perfect case-study of this kind of factional violence. The history of the town during the revolutionary years was characterized by a recurrent cycle of killings, which began not with the Terror but at the very beginning of the Revolution, back in 1789. Aubagne was a market center, an unpretentious agro-town typical of many in Provence. It was, it may seem, unexceptional, distinguished from other rural towns only by its proximity to Marseille, the Mediterranean city which by 1790 had already established (and which gloried in) a new-found reputation for being the most radical and uncompromising revolutionary city in France, uncompromising and given to blood-letting. It also has exceptionally rich administrative and judicial records, which show how far the work of revolutionary bodies from clubs and municipal authorities to courts and military commissions was played out against a backcloth of faction-fighting.

Each change of regime was accompanied by threats of physical violence and repeated calls for the purging of defeated adversaries. In this respect Aubagne was a microcosm of the Southeast more generally. Throughout the region there were regular threats to exact vengeance on opponents—on neighbours, rivals, opposing factions—whether Patriots or Royalists, Catholics or Protestants, Jacobins or anti-Jacobins. As early as 1790 neighbouring Avignon and the Comtat were racked by demands for opponents to be called to justice, and for personal enemies to be hanged in the streets; this was a world of popular lynchings, murders and counter-murders, culminating in massacre in the Tour de la Glacière when prisoners, suspected of royalism, were butchered by Avignon's self-proclaimed Patriots in the name of public safety. In Arles there was hatred and violence between bands of Patriots and Chiffonists; in Salon acts of murderous brigandage; and in La Ciotat lynchings by terror gangs. In the bigger cities of the region, Aix, Marseille and Toulon, each phase of the Revolution was accompanied by the killing and abusing of opponents, while in Toulon the "federalism" which Jacobins reviled so savagely quickly became tainted with accusations of treason as the town and its dockyard were handed over to the British navy. Terror was especially violent in the region - none more so than the justice handed down by the *Commission Populaire* in Orange - with the blood spilt by the Jacobins and their judges amply avenged in the orgy of murder that ensued after Thermidor. Throughout the region, it became increasingly difficult to define politics, to distinguish political principle from common banditry, or to isolate the actions of the political elite from the violence of the streets. This was a land of murder gangs, of prison massacres, of nocturnal ambushes in suburbs, and of hangings from lamp-posts along the principal thoroughfares of towns and cities. Thousands died during the Revolution, some on the scaffold, others in dark alleys, the private victims of sworn enemies. Violence was a constant threat, a part of public life in the towns and villages of Provence. It was not marginalised, or limited to a discrete criminal class. It revelled in inflicting suffering on its victims: public humiliation, tortures to inflict maximum pain, an undisguised pleasure in killing. Politics in the streets had little to do with ballots or popular societies. Provence was vigilante country, and the degree of violence suggests that people enjoyed killing.

The book begins like a good crime novel, with the discovery of three mutilated bodies in Aubagne in 1795, each the victim of a cruel and exceptional degree of violence. Their killers had done a thorough job; indeed, they had apparently enjoyed killing, disfiguring their victims and leaving their remains to rot before the eyes of the whole community. Through the denunciations and interrogations that mark the judicial process, Sutherland constructs something of their family history, showing the links between past humiliations and present revenge, family slights and power struggles. One murder leads inexorably to another as the town's archives unravel a murky story of gang warfare and vigilantism which involved many of the town's leading families and their employees but which also extended to other towns and cities of the region. At this point the focus of the book inevitably changes, too. What started out as a

microhistory of one market town evolves into a regional study, which links killing in Aubagne to quarrels in its violent hinterland, to Arles and Salon, Toulon and especially Marseille. Aubagne was influenced as much by the lead taken by its southern neighbours as by any initiatives from the Convention. The Revolution here is a regional as much as a national phenomenon.

The federalist revolt and the judicial violence of the Terror were, of course, not without significance in drawing the battle lines for the months that followed. But they do not explain everything. For while it is true that those who chose to align with the Jacobins were seldom reluctant to indulge in violence against their enemies—and in this region the numbers attending Jacobin clubs were unusually large—there was more to the resultant animosities than Jacobin politics. Anti-Jacobinism after Thermidor was a popular cause that united local people against the former mayors, prosecutors and witnesses who had peopled the revolutionary tribunals. But anti-Jacobinism often masked older, more deeply entrenched divisions, and the end of the Terror simply opened the floodgates to violence by destroying the civic order on which social peace relied. Lawlessness played into the hands of those who wished to exploit it, the factions and vigilantes already established in the town. They had been there from the beginning of the Revolution, in bitter divisions over the distribution of the tax burden in 1790, in the breaking up of the traditional *Fête des oliviers* by right-wing factions in 1792, in the decision of the Jacobins to call in the National Guard from Marseille to maintain order. People here had long memories; they did not forgive or forget the slights inflicted by their rivals or their enemies.

What emerges is a fascinating tale of social and family jealousies, stories of tax and debt dating from the last years of the Old Regime, tit-for-tat killings across several generations of the same family, and bitter, insatiable feuds that had little to do with politics, at least as Paris and national politicians understood the term. Violence had its roots, Sutherland insists, less in national political divisions than in traditional family feuds and the nature of associative life. It makes for a thoroughly credible tale of a society that comes to life before our eyes, a society with traditional Mediterranean values of loyalty and fierce family pride branded on its soul. It is, one feels, a society that southern politicians understood well, one where conventional ideas of politics have to be set aside, and the political, in the narrow sense that we normally understand, counted for relatively little. Some may feel that this approach goes too far in downgrading the significance of ideas and political causes. But the case is powerfully argued, and the result is a book that cannot be ignored, especially by historians of the Revolution in the provinces. Donald Sutherland offers a convincing explanation for the staggering levels of violence in the South, one that is largely contained within the community itself. In the process, he helps to pull revolutionary politics out of the ghetto in which they are too often discussed, and to integrate the Revolution in the social and cultural history of the eighteenth century. In Aubagne at least, the Revolution can now take its place as part of the *longue durée*.

[1] Colin Lucas, "The Problem of the Midi in the French Revolution," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 28 (December 1978): 1-25; Howard G. Brown, *Ending the French Revolution: Violence, Justice, and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006); Stephen Clay, "Vengeance, Justice and the Reactions in the Revolutionary Midi," *French History* 23:1 (2009): 22-46.

[2] Gwynne Lewis, *The Second Vendée: The Continuity of Counter-Revolution in the Department of the Gard 1789-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Martine Lapiéd, *Le Comtat et la Révolution Française: naissance des options collectives* (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 1996); Jacques Guillaumou, *Marseille républicaine, 1791-1793* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1992).

Alan Forrest
University of York.
aif1@york.ac.uk

Copyright © 2010 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Forum* nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

ISSN 1553-9172

H-France Forum, Volume 5, Issue 3 (Summer 2010), No. 4