

What can a Muslim citizen tell us about the French Revolution?

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Most historians, it must be admitted, love to be right. After spending years writing a book, or refining a major article, we dig our trenches and defend our hard-won theses doggedly against the attacks of others. This paper is dedicated to those historians who love to be *wrong*: who place the joy of discovery and the multiplicity of history above narrower personal concerns. Peter McPhee is one of the resounding examples of this breed: a historian working on large-scale social processes who has always been electrified by the unanticipated details of everyday lives, even when they trouble his larger framings. His openness to a plurality of perspectives has deepened the intellectual richness and humanity of his brilliant work. In what follows, I have taken inspiration from his insight that the search for lived human reality can lead us in unexpected directions and shift our ways of seeing the past.

Buried in a pile of correspondence somewhere in the millions of police records delivered up by the French Revolution is a letter to the Minister of Police in Paris from the Commissioner of the Executive Power at the Administration of the Department of Seine-et-Marne – a characteristically revolutionary mouthful of a title. It is dated 23 Ventôse in the Year VII of the French Revolution, March 13, 1799 in the old style. The Commissioner was writing to report that he had discovered no Algerians or Tunisians living in his department. “As for Muslims,” he continued, “there was a man in the canton of Châtelet named Michel Fertali, subject of the Ottoman Empire, taken prisoner at the siege of Landrecies, but he has made the necessary declaration at the Municipal Administration to enjoy all the rights of a French Citizen, after the delay required by the constitution.”¹ Fertali, he explained, was residing today in the canton of Chaumes, in the rural Brie region, some thirty miles to the east of Paris.

It is only through this lone reference in a bureaucratic document that we discover the first attested case of a Muslim who became a French citizen. This forms an important piece in the argument I make in my forthcoming book, *Muslims and Citizens*, that the French Revolution offered a place for the Muslim citizen, regardless of the fact that only tiny numbers of Muslims actually resided in France in the late eighteenth century. All that we know of Fertali is contained in this one document, revealing little about his life and practice as a Muslim in France. This in itself may tell us something about the wider lack of visibility of Muslims at a time before their presence was linked to colonial policing. But in tracking

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¹ Paris, Archives Nationales, F7 7415, Commissioner of Seine-et-Marne to minister of police, 23 Ventôse, Year VII.

those few details we can find, other trajectories come into view. In this paper, after outlining where Fertali fits into the wider argument of my book, I want to go a little further to discover what else his path might reveal about the larger dimensions of the revolutionary era.

The French Revolution was understood in universal terms from the very outset, by its opponents as much as by its proponents. As one leading revolutionary put it: “The United States gave a great example to the new hemisphere, let us give one to the universe.”² Edmund Burke called this “a great crisis, not of the affairs of France alone, but of all Europe, perhaps of more than Europe.”³ But what did universality mean? Would all the globe be revolutionized? Was this, as Alexis de Tocqueville suggested, a new religion of liberty, equality and fraternity?⁴ Or was it the model for a new, stable and more democratic society that would first be worked out in France?

In all of these conceptions, Muslims figured in important ways. Anyone imagining the geographical spread of the revolution beyond Europe would have to consider the great crescent of Muslim empires that ruled in Western Asia and North Africa. In religious terms, Islam could appear as a more rational alternative to Christianity or as another superstition to be banished. And Muslims themselves could appear as figures of despotism to be defeated, or as brothers to be welcomed.

For more than two centuries, France had maintained a loose alliance with the Ottoman Empire, which was attacked by Austria and Russia in 1787, following the Russian occupation of Crimea. In the struggle against British expansion in India after the Seven Years’ War, the French had allied with Muslim leaders like Tipu Sultan, who sent ambassadors to Paris in 1788. These notable Muslims were a lightning rod for discontent with royal policy. Many expected Louis XVI to help these allies in the way he had helped the Americans, and the perception of diplomatic failure on the global stage deepened the political crisis leading to 1789.⁵ As the Parisian bookseller Prosper-Siméon Hardy wrote in his diary, the sympathy for the Ottoman cause was so strong that everyone in Paris seemed to have “turned Turk”.⁶ Through an unfortunate coincidence, at the very same moment the expiration of treaties with the Muslim states of North Africa deepened the subsistence crisis by opening a threat of raids on shipping, preventing grain from reaching French shores, as Jacques Necker noted in his *Mémoire instructif* to the Committee of Subsistence, published widely in July 1789.⁷ In the southern city of Marseille, local Muslims who had previously remained largely invisible were called upon for the first time to play a role in resolving these conflicts.

Even as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen was drawn up in mid-1789, it remained unclear to whom these rights would apply. Under the ancien régime, only a minority of French men qualified as eligible for political privileges. A patchwork of other groups were excluded: women, non-Catholics, actors, executioners, and of course enslaved Africans in the colonies. In December 1789, some of these exclusions were challenged by a proposition to admit non-Catholics as potential citizens. Clerical opponents, and even some revolutionaries from eastern France, contested the admission of Jews and Muslims. The Assembly passed a decree enfranchising *all* non-Catholics, although dire warnings of anti-Jewish violence convinced them to suspend temporarily its application to Jews. Ironically, then, Muslims were the first non-Christians to be admitted as French citizens. In September

² *Moniteur universel*, August 1, 1789

³ Burke, *Revolutionary Writings*, 327–28.

⁴ Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, 13–14.

⁵ Cf. Kaiser, “The Diplomatic Origins of the French Revolution”.

⁶ Siméon-Prosper Hardy, “Mes loisirs, ou Journal d’évenemens tels qu’ils parviennent à ma connoissance”, VII Années 1787–1788, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS 1701, folio 403.

⁷ M. J. Mavidal and M. E. Laurent (ed.) *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860* (Paris: P. Dupont, 1875–1889) 8: 191 (July 4, 1789).

1791, as the Constitution came into force, liberal deputies used Muslims as a precedent to insist on lifting the last barriers to Jewish citizenship.

By the first anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, Muslims had become part and parcel of revolutionary political culture. In June 1790, the presence of Muslim robes and turbans in a delegation of foreign communities provoked almost delirious enthusiasm amongst deputies at the National Assembly. It seemed to many in that moment that the Revolution's global success was at last assured. Carried by this tide, deputies voted to pass the previously unthinkable motion to abolish the titles of nobility: duke, baron, marquis. This opened the way to a new landscape of equality, but alienated many of the most powerful stakeholders in France, drawing Muslims inexorably into the imaginary of the counter-revolution.

From 1791 the Church split over the revolutionary insistence that priests swear an oath of primary loyalty to the state.⁸ A consistent strain in the rhetoric against the civic oath was the fantasy that Muslims and Jews were multiplying in France, asserting their rights to elect priests and bishops, and building mosques and synagogues.⁹ The response of revolutionaries, however, was telling. Instead of dismissing this assertion as a pure fiction, they doubled down on the rights of religious minorities, insisting that deaths, births and marriages should henceforth be recorded by the state to ensure that Jews and Muslims could be included. In this sense, the rhetoric of the religious party helped to undo their own claims. By 1792, refractory Catholics were claiming Muslims as a precedent for the religious freedom they now sought to establish their own worship distinct from the Constitutional Church.

But as religious violence intensified all over France, some Jacobins began to see religion itself as the root of the problem. These radicals viewed Islam as another superstition to be rooted out along with the priests, and replaced with a Cult of Reason. In Paris, leading Jacobins such as Maximilien Robespierre disagreed, seeing this compulsory atheism as a mirror-image reflection of inflexible Catholicism. A number of its chief proponents – among them leaders of the Paris Commune – ended at the guillotine. Robespierre placed himself firmly at the head of a new deistic movement to create a civic religion of the Supreme Being, drawing accusations that he wanted to raise himself as a new Pope.¹⁰

Robespierre himself made few references to Islam or Muslims, but that did not mean he considered them insignificant. He blamed his Girondin opponents for provoking war with Europe, and saw the attempt to revolutionize Muslims in the Ottoman Empire as a plot to provoke the last remaining major power to join the anti-French coalition. Indeed, by 1794, the Muslim world did seem like the Republic's only friend. The North African state of Algiers was one of the first to recognize the new French Republic after the execution of the king in January 1793, and its ruler, the dey, helped to maintain the supply of Algerian wheat to southern France with loans of hard currency to French traders. The imbroglio over these unpaid debts would play a central part in provoking the French invasion and occupation of Algiers over three decades later.

Yet, as France faced war and counterrevolution in the Year II, Robespierre still believed, like most of his fellow Jacobins, that Muslims would ultimately join the Revolution. When an Indian Muslim named Ahmed Khan applied to the Committee of Public Safety for assistance in early 1794, Robespierre insisted that helping the unfortunate was one of the pillars of revolutionary virtue. Even as many foreign subjects of hostile powers found themselves under suspicion or arrest, this revolutionary hospitality was shared by local

⁸ The essential work on the oath is Tackett, *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture*.

⁹ A survey of sixty clerical pamphlets held at the Jesuit Library in Lyon reveals that twenty-five percent of them mentioned Muslims, and fifty-two percent mentioned Jews.

¹⁰ Mathiez, *La reaction thermidorienne*, 163.

authorities. Ahmed was welcomed by the local committee in Versailles, and began a project to translate the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen into Persian.

That welcoming attitude changed sharply after Thermidor. Coup leaders (including disaffected atheists who opposed Robespierre's religious policy) made extensive use of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad to paint Robespierre as a hypocrite and a fanatic at once. This was just one of the many myths woven around this figure who became the scapegoat for the "Terror" of 1793–94.¹¹ For the Thermidoreans, Ahmed Khan was just a "foreigner" whose only importance was his potential usefulness as a French agent. Under the Directory, French armies began to expand across Europe. In 1798, the new minister of the interior, the ex-bishop Talleyrand, pushed a plan to attack Britain on two fronts, through Egypt and Ireland. Somehow, despite his much-vaunted military genius, the young General Bonaparte was persuaded that Egyptian Muslims would hail the French army as liberators. On arrival, he had pamphlets in Arabic distributed claiming that the French were Muslims. After a lightning victory, Bonaparte soon discovered that Talleyrand's claims – along with the latter's undertaking to travel to Istanbul and inform the sultan – were nothing but a cynical ruse: the French fleet was lost, and half the army left stranded on the other side of the Mediterranean. Leaving his army to rot in Egypt, he sailed back to France to play his part in ending the Revolution and installing a dictatorship.

In a sense, then, Robespierre was right. The attempt to revolutionize Muslims really *was* a plot to provoke France's only remaining friend, and bring an end to the Revolution. The gratuitous act of hostility against a neutral power led the Ottoman sultan to join the coalition of anti-revolutionary powers, and to declare a *jihad* against France. In response, on 23 Nivôse – January 12, 1799 – the Minister of Police sent out a circular instructing local officials to "make the most exact enquiries to discover all Muslims, subjects of the Sultan, in your districts and send me as quickly as possible a list of their names, the commune where they reside, their manner of industry or trade, the companies they work with, and lastly the properties they own in the entire territory of the Republic."¹² A few weeks later, after news that French subjects had been imprisoned in North Africa, the Directory ordered the immediate arrest of all subjects of Algiers and Tunis and the seizure of their property. Five Tunisian Muslims were arrested in Lyon, but some thirty departments across the Republic replied that there were no Algerians or Tunisians living in their territory.¹³

This vast search for Muslims across the Republic from the Vendée to the Var did not produce any of the Muslims that the Minister of Police seems to have expected to find, but it stands as a stark revelation of how deeply this imagination of a Muslim presence in France had penetrated the revolutionary imagination. At the same time, it marked the point at which that imagination was ceasing to be revolutionary at all. Fertali, the Muslim citizen, emerges into view at the very moment in which the very substance of citizenship was dissolving. In Marseille and Paris, a number of Jews of Algerian origin were imprisoned under brutal conditions, despite their protestation that they were French citizens, and had done all they could to assist the French captives in Algiers. After the return of Bonaparte from Egypt in 1799, and the coup d'état that he led against the elected government on 18 Brumaire, equal citizenship was rapidly replaced by subjecthood, with privileges determined not by rights but by service to the state.

I will close by tracing something of the path that brought Fertali to this moment of visibility, as nearly as it is possible to reconstruct his trajectory. When I visited the archives of the Department of Seine-et-Marne in Melun to search for him, I found no trace at all. But

¹¹ See McPhee, *Robespierre*, xvi.

¹² Yvelines, Archives Départementales, 1L 428.

¹³ Paris, Archives Nationales, F7 7415.

other fragments in the archives allow us to piece together a possible trajectory, and also begin to suggest how this apparently unique figure might in fact reveal the “exceptional normal” of this period. As we look at the inventories of the archive, we begin to see multiple references to refugees, exiles, prisoners and deportees – from the colonies, from India, from the Vendée, along with the “patriots of Landrecies” who came to the area in Fructidor of the Year II.¹⁴ Among them were Louis Aza, African, refugee of Guadeloupe; Jean-Philippe Templier, deportee of Pondicherry; the widow Decaulière and her nieces, refugees from Saint-Domingue.¹⁵ Johann Friedrich Ahasverus Engel of Hamburg, known under the name of John Roads, who had taken a job as a servant on an American ship to Jamaica, was taken by a French corsair, released, taken prisoner on an English frigate, pressed into service sailing to Finland, and finally ending up in rural Île-de-France.¹⁶ Among these remarkably colorful figures that suggest a very different complexion to the French peasants we might have imagined, were 944 prisoners of war, at Fontainebleau and Melun, subsequently distributed into various districts of the region. Among them were several noted as born in Turkey, along with those from England, Ireland, Poland, Bohemia and Hanover.¹⁷ One document from October 26, 1792 declares that “We, the municipal officers of the town of Fontainebleau, certify that the citizen Ignace Nitsman, artillery officer in the German Legion, and Austrian deserter, today swore the oath to be faithful to the French Republic, to preserve liberty and equality or to die at his post defending them. This oath having been explained to him by an interpreter, we delivered him this present document in the town hall.”¹⁸

From our lone document we may surmise that, like Ignace Nitsman, Fertali was also an Austrian deserter, taken prisoner at the siege of Landrecies in Belgium in 1793. But how did an Ottoman Muslim subject come to be fighting against the French? Balázs Lázár has written on the treatment of Ottomans taken captive by the Austrian army, and suggests that they were faced with a stark choice. They could remain as captives, possibly for years, until they could be released in exchange for Austrian prisoners of war. Alternatively, they could accept conversion to Christianity and achieve immediate liberty; in which case they were without delay conscripted into the Austrian army.¹⁹ It seems likely that Fertali took his chances on conversion, and thus found himself fighting the French in Belgium, or the “Austrian Netherlands” as it was then known. This may be why he was described with a Christian name, “Michel”; he may have adopted another surname also, rendering him invisible in the archive. Yet somehow the local authorities knew that he was Muslim: they seem to have made little of this until instructed to do so by the Directory in 1799. If this was Fertali’s path, then, it was only by coming to revolutionary France that he could abandon the fiction of conversion, and be *both* a Muslim and a citizen.²⁰

Just a few months earlier, in September 1798, the Minister of the Marine and Colonies had replied at length to a query about citizenship from the same Commissioner of Seine-et-Marne. “The question on which you consult me,” he wrote, “seems clearly resolved by article 10 of the constitution, of which I cite the text as follows: The foreigner becomes a French citizen when, having reached the age of 21, and having declared his intention of settling in France, he has resided there for seven consecutive years, as long as he pays direct taxes, and also owns some land, or an agricultural or commercial business, or has married a

¹⁴ Seine-et-Marne, Archives Départementales, L 209.

¹⁵ Seine-et-Marne, Archives Départementales, L 216.

¹⁶ Seine-et-Marne, Archives Départementales, L 447.

¹⁷ Seine-et-Marne, Archives Départementales, L 448.

¹⁸ Seine-et-Marne, Archives Départementales, L 448.

¹⁹ Lázár, “Turkish Captives in Hungary”, 424–26.

²⁰ For prisoners of war who chose to remain in rural France, see Jarrouse, *Auvergnats malgré eux*, 206–10.

Frenchwoman.”²¹ This was the promise of the French Revolution – the promise of citizenship to those who swore their loyalty to the republic, to liberty and equality, by their words and by their acts. It was a promise offered to Muslims as well as to Jews, to people of color, to refugees and even to former enemies. Yet it was a fragile promise, one that would be betrayed just months after Fertali became eligible for citizenship, and would vanish almost completely under the imperial diktat of Napoleon Bonaparte.²²

What, then, can a single Muslim citizen tell us about the French Revolution? For me, this obscure figure whose life is inscribed only by accident on a single page can tell us that the French Revolution was much more diverse than we have imagined. Its promise was not simply abstract, it set in train great waves of movement across the globe, from the Caribbean to South Asia, even stretching into Africa and China. This was not just a movement of ideas, it was a movement of people whose visions were changing the world in which they traveled, and the French Revolution of which they were a part must be understood as the product of their experience. Even Fertali, whose mind we can never know, and who was probably just a small and insignificant local trader, worker or artisan, was a part of this greater movement. In being so, he changed the world in some sense by his decision to become a Muslim citizen of France. As the first who comes to light, he stands for the others lost in the appropriate *indifference* of the republic, which did not, and should not, concern itself to what religion he belonged.

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²¹ Seine-et-Marne, Archives Départementales, L 447.

²² Cf. Rapport, *Nationality and Citizenship in Revolutionary France*, Epilogue.