

**The “Affaire Petit”:  
Revolutionary Nevers and An Early Challenge to the Power of the Church**

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### **Introduction**

Early on the morning of January 21, 1792 youths (*enfants*) broke into a church at Nevers and desecrated the corpse of the Veuve Petit, a wealthy woman whose family militantly supported the refractory (non-juring) priests of the diocese. The Petit family had become rich from their involvement in the faience industry and in goldsmithing. The woman’s body was taken from her coffin (*bière*), which had been left in the Saint-Cyr church during the weekend before her internment, and then rolled down a hill, kicked around the streets and left suspended over the bollard of a balcony. The events shocked the religious community of Nevers but the ramifications soon escalated when an excited crowd gathered and argued about what should be done in the climate of division that now appeared to threaten new revolutionary initiatives. There is very little information about how the *enfants* were dealt with in relation to their actions that morning but there is evidence of a strong and growing interrogation in the community about how the new administrative, judicial and religious officials were expected to handle the situation.

The first person summoned to the scene of the riot was one of the newly elected *juges de paix* of Nevers, François Guinot. He was not engaged to do this by citizens who saw him as protecting their interests – nor to represent the youths responsible for the disturbance. A refractory priest had summoned him to help restore order. The priest brought the body back to the church with members of his congregation who had taken the youths in hand. The local authorities then joined together to help quell what became a riot outside the Saint-Cyr church. Guinot immediately went to the mayor to request that a detachment of the National Guard be called out. The municipal officers could not agree on any such order and the riot escalated even further. By the afternoon people continued to gather outside the church expressing “overheated emotions”. Some among them wanted the coffin opened and were threatening to assassinate the vicar if he did not comply with their request. Others wanted the body immediately inhumed to de-escalate the situation. The *juge de paix* was called back out again. Someone then plunged a knife into the coffin to find out if the corpse had really been returned. The knife came out bloody. But this time the *juge de paix* had even less effect in calming the situation and was himself injured in the melee.<sup>1</sup>

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The author would like to thank the Piat family of Nevers (and Lyon) for their help in researching the beautiful town and its history during the French Revolution for this article.

The overriding concern of the crowd was how the *juges de paix* and other officials elected in the recent departmental elections appeared to endorse conservative values. These officials were suspected of obstructing many of the long-awaited revolutionary changes to political and judicial administration as well as the religious changes, most importantly the taking of a constitutional oath. Concerns voiced in Nevers appear to have anticipated and fuelled the growth of the dechristianization movement which would later influence France more generally. It has been accepted by historians who focus on the revolutionary changes to the Catholic Church that the provinces had an important part to play in the dechristianization movement from 1793. Michel Vovelle observed that some of the first significant initiatives in its development were evident in the Nièvre region.<sup>2</sup> Nicole Bossut has more closely investigated the local “militant atheists” of Nevers, who interacted with Joseph Fouché early in 1793, and concluded they did profoundly influence his later attacks on the Catholic cult.<sup>3</sup> Accepting these findings about the importance of Nevers in this discrete area is reason enough to look more closely at why influencers of such note emerged there. This paper looks at how the “Affaire Petit”, a year earlier, contributed to the formation of strong popular views about revolutionary changes – especially those targeting the clergy – which, in turn, helps explain the atheistic tendencies that emerged in the region.

### Revolutionary Changes in Nevers

Nevers was briefly visited by Arthur Young as he toured France in January 1790 and he saw little to distinguish it from other towns, despite its few buildings which presented as baubles or “sparkling gems”. He observed that “Towns thus seen, resemble a group of women huddled close together: you see their nodding plumes and sparkling gems; but on nearer inspection, the faces are too often but common clay.”<sup>4</sup> He moved on quickly to arrive in Paris some two days later.<sup>5</sup> The town was situated some 22 hours south of Paris by post-chaise and a further 27 hours away from Lyon to the east.<sup>6</sup> Paul Meunier, whose more comprehensive study of the revolutionary period was written in 1892, agrees with Young’s brief summation and adds it was a “muddy place” with crowded streets and unhealthy housing for most of its inhabitants.<sup>7</sup> The disparities were – and still are – stunning between the incomparable ducal palace with its decorative turrets, the churches and monasteries with their extensive gardens behind tall stone walls, the once lovely hotel “Grand Monarque” situated near the river, and the beautiful arched stone bridge that led into the town, on the one hand, but, on the other hand, the narrow crooked medieval streets where most people lived in crowded privation. These disparities would predictably lead to strong actions and reactions during the Revolution, and ones that were fundamentally different to those in Paris.

In the two short years between 1790 and 1792 enormous changes would take place in the town and its citizenry became more confident in exercising their new revolutionary rights. Nevers was chosen as the “*chef-lieu*” of the department of the Nièvre just months after Young’s visit. There were now eighty departments in France and each was subdivided again into districts and the smaller units of the canton.<sup>8</sup> Citizens were able to vote for administrative and judicial officers in their primary assemblies, a fundamental change which gave them initially

<sup>1</sup> Archives départementales du Nièvre (hereafter ADN), 1 L 190 Police Sûreté; ADN, 23 L 19 Tribunal district. Affaire Veuve Petit. 1792.

<sup>2</sup> Vovelle, *La Révolution*, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Bossut, “Aux origines,” 198–99.

<sup>4</sup> Young, *Arthur Young’s Travels*, 286–88.

<sup>5</sup> Young, *Arthur Young’s Travels*, 286–88.

<sup>6</sup> Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789*, 67.

<sup>7</sup> Meunier, *Nevers historique*, 94.

<sup>8</sup> Woloch, *The New Regime Transformation*, 37.

high expectations of the democratic process, according to Malcolm Crook.<sup>9</sup> In August 1790 there was again a high turnout for the election of the new “*juge de paix*” in the Nièvre where a large percentage of eligible citizens (46 percent) continued to vote after apathy had set in in many other regions.<sup>10</sup> This official was one of the most innovative of the judicial changes because he could be approached at the cantonal level by any citizen who wished to pursue their rights in the court system with little expense or procedural impediments. There were criminal courts set up in each of the districts and at the departmental level, the higher *tribunaux criminels* which were staffed by rotations of district court judges and a core of professional judges with legal training or experience. Both district and departmental courts operated with juries of citizens. Hervé Leuwers and Antoine Boulant are just some of a number of French scholars recently writing about these transformative changes.<sup>11</sup> They were meant to ensure the liberty of individuals against any potential abuse by governments and worked with other changes like the new penal code to bring transparency into criminal proceedings.<sup>12</sup>

Changes to the institution of the Catholic Church in the town were equally as extensive. Landed property owned by the dioceses began to be acquired by the state as mendicant and contemplative orders were closed in 1790, and in 1791 a Civil Constitution was required to be signed by the clergy who would then become salaried. This decision had been precipitated by national economic needs, to gain access to much-needed resources with which to allay the nation’s creditors, but it also directly empowered citizens to demand accountability from the clergy.<sup>13</sup> Such changes were not initially envisaged as destroying the powerful edifice of the Catholic Church but were rather meant to regularize the dysfunction and maladministration which had become so rampant in its hierarchies.<sup>14</sup> But the oath and other religious changes would have a divisive effect, here and elsewhere, that lessened the commitment of many citizens to the well-received judicial and democratic changes. Edward Woell suggests that official intervention aimed at enforcing the state oath actually had the effect of increasing local conflicts in 1791–92.<sup>15</sup> He goes on to question whether the later movement of dechristianization was also imposed by the state or whether, as Vovelle suggested, there had been a spontaneous or “self-perpetuating” trend that led to ideological change in communities and amongst some clergy that “came to light in 1791–2”.<sup>16</sup> Before we can assess the effect of the “Affaire Petit” in this pivotal year in Nevers in terms of this anti-clerical trend it is, however, necessary to understand the significance of local variables and impacts from earlier years. To do this, we need to begin with the most sparkling gem of Nevers, the ducal palace.

The palace had long played a central part in the history of the town. It had been a fortress but was remodelled in the sixteenth century and become one of the admired châteaux of the Loire. The rebuilding was influenced by Renaissance ideas borrowed from Italy. From the time of Charles IX, whose mother Catherine was a direct descendant of Lorenzo de’ Medici, Italian influences were strong in France. The Italian family of Gonzague inherited the duchy of Nevers when Louis Gonzaga married the Duchess of Nevers, Henriette de Clèves. The new duke was also responsible for introducing to Nevers the Italian arts of glass-blowing and what would become the iconic industry of painted earthenware known in Italy as “majolica” and in France as “faïence”.<sup>17</sup> These innovations encouraged an artisanal flowering in the town and then, by the eighteenth century, the formation of a rich mercantile elite there as faïence factories

<sup>9</sup> Crook, *Elections in the French Revolution*, 45, 67.

<sup>10</sup> Edelstein, *The French Revolution*, 195.

<sup>11</sup> Leuwers, *La justice*; Boulant, *Le tribunal révolutionnaire*.

<sup>12</sup> Berger, *La justice pénale*, 220.

<sup>13</sup> Van Kley, “The Ancien Régime, Catholic Europe,” 126–29.

<sup>14</sup> Vovelle, *La Révolution contre l’église*, 27–28.

<sup>15</sup> Woell, “The Origins and Outcomes,” 153.

<sup>16</sup> Woell, “The Origins and Outcomes,” 154.

<sup>17</sup> Moroney, “Alessandro Striggio’s Mass,” 13–14.

developed. By 1788 it was noted that there were a dozen manufactories in Nevers each employing some 150 to 160 workers, including women and children, and an especially large factory in the canton of Moulins, which employed some 800 workers.<sup>18</sup> However the factories had been hard hit by the negotiation of the Treaty of Vergennes, the Franco-English free trade agreement of 1786, which led to a significant drop in fabrication and loss of wages for local workers. Petitions outlining the negative effects of this agreement were sent to the National Assembly in 1790, from both factory owners and affected workers, requesting help from the authorities. One ironic suggestion made was that English faïence should not be used in preference to that from Nevers at official banquets. The petitions also emphasized the added difficulties the town had because it was still recovering from the ravages of the flooding of the Loire in 1789.<sup>19</sup> Louis-Jules Barbon Mancini-Mazarin was now the Duke of Nevers and he complained of the disputations and rivalry amongst the different towns in the region, but he was eventually chosen as the representative for the meeting of the Third Estate in Versailles.<sup>20</sup>

By 1791 elected municipal officers and the judges of the district court began to sit in the ducal palace. This was itself a huge reimagining of the power base of the town, enhancing the rights of the citizens. Nunneries and parish churches in Nevers were closed in late 1791 and became “*biens nationaux*,” their previously hidden gardens commandeered for the state. Spaces that had belonged exclusively to the Church then slowly became more accessible to all citizens. But it was not only important buildings that were repurposed as the Revolution progressed. A tune by a composer of the seventeenth century who lived in Nevers, one who became famous under the patronage of another duchess of Nevers, Louise-Marie de Gonzague, was also borrowed for contemporary use. Adam Billault had written elegiac poems and songs and many were famous in Paris. Some of his compositions were used to express revolutionary sentiments. A new transcription to one of these songs – entitled “*Complainte sur un arrêté ridicule et méchant au sujet d’un bière*” – was printed as a broadsheet and disseminated to the public in January 1792. *Complaintes* or “lamentations” were a traditional way to express heroic stories. In this case the *complainte* related to a moment when tensions between administrative officers and citizens exploded over some of the changes that had taken place in the town. The song celebrated the heroism of the people faced with the intransigence of the more established hierarchies which were still in evidence. It showed the deep schism in the Church in Nevers with most priests refusing to take the constitutional oath supporting the Revolution and this conflict lay at the heart of the drama.

### The “Affaire Petit”

The *spectacle scandaleux* of the “Affaire Petit” was clearly focused on the divisive religious question in Nevers but it first touched on the political and judicial tensions that had also been brewing. The *complainte sur un arrêté ridicule et méchant* that was circulated soon after the riot, as its title would suggest, was focused on the popular dismay at certain orders made by the conservative officials of the department. Four municipal officials favourable to conservatives of the town were seen to be pitted against the other five officials who were supportive of the people and who were in the majority. The department’s “ridiculous and incompetent” actions of calling out the National Guard to confront a group of “curious women holding the hands of little children” – not the dangerous rioters the officials claimed were involved – showed the community how determined the department was to see things through the distorted “lens of the ancien régime” and how ready they were to punish innocent citizens

<sup>18</sup> Rosen, *La Faïence de Nevers*, 314.

<sup>19</sup> Rosen, *La Faïence*, 316.

<sup>20</sup> Harris, “Fouché, en Nivernais une révolution.”

for the turbulence that they themselves had encouraged.<sup>21</sup> The real problematic in the situation facing the town, according to the popular record, was the continued privileges of the aristocratic families and the machinations of the unrepentant priests who were using the *juge de paix* to quell unrest but in a way that was contrary to the law and would only end with “tears”. The song squarely alleged that the authorities were responsible for a conspiracy (*complot*) that then denied the people their civil rights. In the oral record the departmental officials themselves – Jousselin, Guillier, Chapsal, Duviquier, Morin, Cabaille Leblanc, Ballard and Collenot – were named and blamed for history to counteract the naming and blaming of the municipal officers in the departmental record, those who sided with the people.<sup>22</sup>

The departmental authorities also told their version of the events and highlighted the significance of the “Affaire Petit” in the official record. The facts are basically the same as told in the *complainte* but the responsibility for the violence was inverted. The departmental officials condemned those they thought responsible for “outrageous” and “scandalous” behaviour perpetrated – but not the youths involved. They kept their wrath for the municipal officers who had failed to take action to stop the threats to the vicar (a refractory) and the official *juge de paix* when a course of action was advised to them. They claimed that a special sitting of the municipality had been summoned at 11 in the morning of January 21 when events at the church were discussed and the municipality were asked by the *procureur* (legal officer) of the commune to summon the National Guard. A suggestion was made that the bishop should bury the body then and there to avoid any more trouble. Of the nine municipal officers present, the department noted, five refused to consider the request. The other four were concerned that because of this inaction the situation would escalate. It was claimed that many of the agitators in the crowd had then gone on to threaten to destroy the houses of the descendants of the Veuve Petit and to prevent the burial by the bishop. Other citizens were observed to have shut themselves in their houses out of fear. It was alleged by the department that the elected municipal officers had neglected their duty to “re-establish” tranquillity at the first “sparks of sedition” – that is, when there were signs of a “state of insurrection or at least the danger of imminent trouble”.<sup>23</sup> The dissenting municipal officers, Messieurs Meunier, Gouy, Callot, Cari Mantrand, and Blondet Girard, were accused by the departmental officers of refusing to take action to maintain law and order and of joining in the riot and thus sowing the suspicion and fear which threatened to split the municipality. They were warned of their liability in the criminal courts if they failed to take necessary action in the future. An order to this effect was printed, copied, and put up in all the cantons of the department.<sup>24</sup>

### The Campaign Against Refractory Priests

The incompatible ideological viewpoints of the officers in this instance completely shatter any illusions of a smooth transition to the new order – either political, judicial or religious – in the town. Following the affair, two of the originally accused municipal officers, Meunier and Callot, continued to be targeted by departmental officials. Evidence of their dealing with fabricated coins would be soon after brought before Judge Etienne Gounot of the district court (on March 4, 1792). This matter was then joined to a denunciation made by a printer, one Jacques Lefebvre, who accused the municipal officers of being implicated in the dissemination of two pieces of writing found in the streets calling for action against refractory priests and aristocrats a year earlier. The anonymous notes had been found on October 7 and 8, 1791 and delivered to the departmental officer, Ballard. One of the notes claimed to be an “alert to

<sup>21</sup> [n.a.], *Complainte sur un arrêté ridicule*.

<sup>22</sup> [n.a.], *Complainte sur un arrêté ridicule*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> ADN 23 L 20, Extrait des registres des délibérations de la Nièvre: Séance du 23 janvier 1792.

<sup>24</sup> ADN 23 L 20, Extrait des registres des délibérations de la Nièvre: Séance du 23 janvier 1792.

citizens” to be watchful of the departmental officials Morin and Coquille, who were joining the refractory priests and the aristocrats of the city to ignite civil war in the town. The other note was directed at churchgoers of St Martin (at Clamecy) and warned that the refractory priests preaching there were turning families against each other and were plotting civil war.<sup>25</sup> Gounot, in his role as Director of the Jury of the district court presented both matters to the jury of accusation on October 29, 1792, one year after the anonymous notes had been allegedly found. Was this accusation a retributive act warning the so-called radicals (Meunier and Callot) of their lack of control of the legal process by departmental officials, using the law against them because of their political stand in 1792? The *complainte* describing the “Affaire Petit” certainly suggested this was so and the song concluded with the threat that sooner or later there would be real justice meted out to the “imprudent” departmental directory.<sup>26</sup> This view of the situation was reiterated in a printed notice by the Société Populaire (Amis de la Constitution), signed by Chamrobert (president) in 1792, and posted in the town to assure the citizens that order and the law would not be compromised by those club members who would continue to be vigilant about abuses. This *adresse* accused “wicked officials” of the “most incendiary” and false allegations against members of the club and aimed to reassure citizens of the club’s innocence of base motives and their commitment to “order, tolerance, subordination to the constituted authorities, submission to the laws, and the most complete devotion to the public good”.<sup>27</sup>

The ballot box also confirmed that most citizens did not believe the trumped-up charges. The qualification for eligibility to vote had been made less onerous in September 1792 and more citizens of Nevers were able to cast their ballot in the November elections. There was as a result a dramatic democratization of the municipal and judicial offices. One Louis “Socrates” Damour became president of the *Tribunal de district* of Nevers and he was soon noticed because of his call for the deportation of a dozen refractory priests in January 1793. Callot was also rehabilitated by popular acclaim. He was elected *procureur-syndic* of the district. The Jacobins, though very vocal, were however still being regularly stymied. Two representatives-on-mission, Collot d’Herbois and Goyre-Leplanche, were sent out from Paris in April 1793 to help the region adapt to the new order. However, they were also “badly received,” according to a local historian, Jean-Pierre Harris, and had a distinct lack of success in raising money for the national cause when they staged a symbolic guillotining of the traitor Dumouriez in a square in Nevers.<sup>28</sup> At the end of the month Damour led a number of National Guard members and two constitutional priests to the canton of Clamecy to confront “seditious” priests at the church of St Martin and called for the people to take “direct action” against the “fanaticism of the rich”.<sup>29</sup>

The community, however, soon became more concerned about the reception of the national law for a maximum price for grain and flour, which had been legislated on May 4. Reactionary elements, they believed, ensured that this law had a negative effect in the markets of Nevers. Administrators, merchants, and priests, they suspected, had been colluding because grain simply disappeared. Some cantons were more reactionary than others, and Clamecy and La Charité appeared to be particularly controlled by refractory priests and their parishes. The *Commissaire Nationale* of the *Tribunal de district*, Pierre Chamrobert, who had been actively involved in the role since 1791 but who had a reputation amongst the more moderate judges as a “violent atheist,” was expelled from the “société populaire” of La Charité and disarmed on

<sup>25</sup> ADN 23 L 25. Faux contre Meurnier et Callot. 1792.

<sup>26</sup> *Complainte sur un arrêté ridicule*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Gallica BNF Lb 40 2844. Adresse des Amis de la Constitution aux citoyens de Nevers. 1792.

<sup>28</sup> Harris, “Fouché,” 10.

<sup>29</sup> Bossut, “Aux origines,” 189.

May 7, 1793.<sup>30</sup> Damour soon after took retributive action by marshalling thirty citizens of Nevers to protect the minority of Jacobins at Clamecy and to lecture club members at La Charité about the necessity to use violence against the rich merchants and farmers who were in league with the refractory priest to prevent the movement of grain.<sup>31</sup> He denounced the Girondins expelled from the Convention in Paris after May 31 and at the same time denounced the local departmental officials and the “rich inhabitants of the town” who supported them.<sup>32</sup> Callot, meanwhile, was given the task of gathering silver and gold plate from the churches and transporting the seventeen trunks of jewels and gold he found to the National Convention.<sup>33</sup> While he was there after May 31, he, too, took the opportunity to denounce the moderate departmental officials to the Convention, including the *procureur général syndic* Ballard, who had originally implicated him in the Veuve Petit affair and been involved in the forgery matter.

Once the representative-on-mission, Joseph Fouché, was assigned to Nevers from July 29 to November 1793, the position of the local Jacobins was bolstered. The purpose for his visit had been initially to encourage citizens there to take up arms against the rebels of the Vendée. He had first-hand knowledge of the dangers of the insurrection there when he had been stationed at Nantes. However he was mindful of the divisions in the town and so made sure to be conciliatory, reminding the citizens of the spirit of the new laws in his first proclamation upon arrival:

The birth of the Constitution [of 1793] which brings together the natural man and the man of truth, will lead to a political space of rejoicing where all previous mistakes will be forgiven, where man will begin to live under the new laws as under a new era...the reign of the kings is finished, that of the people commences...The people have only to rise up and all will fall down before them...[before] triumphant liberty.<sup>34</sup>

While at first Fouché tried to reinvigorate virtuous sentiments among the Nivernais he soon addressed the economic situation. On August 6 he created a committee in charge of dividing subsistence food resources between the country and the cantons. He lowered the price of bread even further and ordered that those merchants who refused to sell it at the price of 3 *sols* would be exposed on the scaffold on market day. Next he ordered an impost be paid by the rich “aristocrats” of the town on August 25. The contribution of the Duke of Nevers Mancini-Mazarin was assessed at 50,000 *livres* and when he did not pay, the Duke was arrested and imprisoned on October 20.<sup>35</sup> So far it would appear that the national representatives were playing a strong-man role, using their authority to make sure the laws were imposed and the local Jacobins were able to function despite the opposition of some of the more regional areas.

This support for the local Jacobins then meant that the religious questions so integral to the “Affaire Petit” were again addressed. Damour was appointed to the post of professor of morals for the youth of Nevers at the new college by Fouché.<sup>36</sup> Damour continued to be focused on the guilt of the refractory priests in engineering the local economic crises and was determined to convince Fouché of the danger they represented. At the baptism of Fouché’s daughter by the constitutional bishop of Nevers, Guillaume Tollet, Damour publicly challenged Tollet’s beliefs as not being sufficiently “materialist”.<sup>37</sup> Damour agreed to help Fouché in his

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<sup>30</sup> Bossut, “Aux origines,” 188–91.

<sup>31</sup> Bossut, “Aux origines,” 190.

<sup>32</sup> Bossut, “Aux origines,” 185.

<sup>33</sup> Bossut, “Aux origines,” 192.

<sup>34</sup> Harris, “Fouché,” 11–12.

<sup>35</sup> Harris, “Fouché,” 12.

<sup>36</sup> Bossut, “Aux origines,” 191.

<sup>37</sup> Bossut, “Aux origines,” 191.

campaign to have the subsistence question solved but, after being sent on a mission to Corbigny to find grain for the starving people of Nevers at the end of August, Damour then had evidence that the *curé* of Moraches was involved in the hiding of grain. The priest was arrested. Later Damour was sent to Guérigny with the Hebertist, Chaumette (who was also in Nevers bringing his mother back to her natal home), to warn the workers there of their rights. He again arrested the local *curé* as well as the former director of the blacksmithing forges.<sup>38</sup> Finally Damour felt confident that Fouché found his concerns about the complicity of the refractory clergy in the economic difficulties substantiated. Damour was given a central place in the celebration of the feast day of Brutus held on September 22, when Fouché led a procession into the St Cyr church and when Callot placed a bust of Brutus on the altar. This ceremony has been commonly seen as the beginning of Fouché’s well-known radical attack on the cult of the Catholic priests.<sup>39</sup> However Damour was the one who gave a vigorous anti-clerical speech during the civic ceremony. On September 25 Fouché would go on to order that priests no longer be subject to the “unnatural rule” that they should not marry.<sup>40</sup> According to Bossut, it was one Abbé Parent of Clamecy who believed a “*morale républicaine*” should replace the fanaticism of the old order, and who “seduced” Fouché into developing his programme of dechristianization. However, as we can see by the concerted campaign of Damour, it was also the atheist Jacobins of Nevers and the pressure they exerted with constant warnings about the dangers of the refractory clergy that helped persuade Fouché of the necessity to curb the religious cult and replace it with the atheistic cult which was subsequently taken to the rest of France.<sup>41</sup>

The riot of early 1792 had escalated into a strong anti-clerical campaign locally. But it really only began to change the face of Nevers from 1793 when Fouché and Chaumette supported the local Jacobins. Churches were now reallocated as useful places for workshops and civic institutions. The convent of the Jacobins became a hospice for unmarried pregnant women. This would appear to be in response to the practice of abandoning babies that could not be cared for. In the winter of 1792–93 the *juge de paix* of the *Section Couchant* had had to deal with a number of such abandonment cases in front of the Hôtel-Dieu, including some babies who died from exposure despite being wrapped in oversized shirts or tablecloths and woollen hats.<sup>42</sup> The gardens of the Minimes Church became a botanic garden. The garden of the Capucins became a foundry making some 600 cannon for the revolutionary war effort.<sup>43</sup> Workers and artisans at the local faience factories also made their views apparent as to the changing balance in society and their belief that it was the clergy in league with the aristocrats that were the real enemies of the Revolution.

## Conclusion

The “Affaire Petit” of early 1792 was critically important because it began with a municipal and judicial challenge to the conservative officers who supported the refractory priests and thereby exposed the deep ideological differences in the town that had lain dormant until then. The way the affair was handled initially by conservative authorities – in an extremely partisan way – served to harden popular feeling against unrepentant priests who supported the privileged classes. Interrogating the affair thus suggests that it was a spontaneous reaction against the role of the Catholic Church, one which was integral to the expression of political

<sup>38</sup> Bossut, “Aux origines,” 190.

<sup>39</sup> Harris, “Fouché,” 14; Bossut, “Aux origines,” 192.

<sup>40</sup> Harris, “Fouché,” 13.

<sup>41</sup> Bossut, “Aux origines,” 192.

<sup>41</sup> Bossut, “Aux origines,” 196.

<sup>42</sup> ADN 64 L 5. Procès verbaux d’exposition des enfants trouvés. 1793.

<sup>43</sup> Meunier, *Nevers historique*, 97.

opinions locally. Anger continued to grow because the conservative administrators failed to appreciate the public support for the Jacobins who spoke out against refractory forces. Many citizens from this time saw the refractory priests as engaging in anti-revolutionary activity by their support of conservative officials and the aristocrats, and they made their unease known to representatives-on-mission, including Fouché. The departmental officials had only made the conflict more toxic when they insisted those who were urging the priests to take the constitutional oath were “violent extremists”. The Jacobins Callot, Damour, and Chamrobert, continued to strongly urge action against the local clergy when they took office in November 1792. Fouché, together with local leaders then linked the refractory priests to the economic crises that troubled Nevers. They found rogue priests behind grain hoarding and other civil disturbances, and took steps to have them arrested. Eventually, Fouché was himself convinced of the dangers of the anti-revolutionary sentiments the refractory clergy held, and this appears to have led to the even bigger challenge to the Catholic Church itself of the dechristianization movement which Fouché would later encourage nationally. There is thus little evidence that national authorities attempted to impose a view that the refractory clergy were guilty of counter-revolutionary actions on the town, but rather the contrary. From the time of the *complainte* of January 1792 it seems there was already a strong divide in the town and a popular belief that non-juring priests were part of a plot in coalition with the “aristocrats” against the people. The “*Affaire*” began a strong anti-clerical campaign which continued to reverberate into 1793, when the representatives Fouché and Chaumette were convinced to support the Nivernais Jacobins. The local eruption of dissent became a political and religious confrontation with consequences that reached far beyond the town itself.

In a parody of their targeting of refractory priests Callot and Damour would later be accused in the Thermidorian period of having stolen riches from the churches, a “classic accusation” used against former Jacobins.<sup>44</sup> The Catholic religion itself would be allowed in 1795 to be practiced again privately, and a reformed Gallican Church had a brief resurgence, but, according to Woell, the vacillation about religious policy during the Directory period led to an increase in centralized state power.<sup>45</sup> Judicial changes of the Revolution were also frequently changed and watered down as the court system evolved under the Directory period and into the Consulate of Napoleon. The recruitment of juries and citizen elected *juges de paix* would gradually be taken over by the state, which meant citizens became less and less central to the judicial edifice. But in 1792–93 citizens of Nevers had an impact, albeit a startlingly violent one, that would influence the nation in the brief period when the policy of dechristianization swept through the country.

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<sup>44</sup> Bossut, “Aux origines,” 193.

<sup>45</sup> Woell, ‘The Origins and Outcomes’, 155–56.

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