

Interview / Reynald Secher

The Vendean genocide debunks the myth of the French Revolution

CULTURE

03_07_2026



**Stefano
Chiappalone**



Vendée-Vengé: in French, the sombre play on words with which revolutionary France changed the name of the Vendée – the department that became the epicentre of the rebellion against the ‘new principles’ – is more immediately apparent, renaming it (not with water but with blood) ‘Avenged’. And then forgotten, so as not to tarnish the myth

of the Revolution of 1789. This story was brought to light by Reynald Secher, who in 1986 published *Le génocide franco-français: la Vendée-Vengé*, with a preface by Jean Meyer and an introduction by Pierre Chaunu. His research cost him dearly in terms of his “career”, but since then Secher has never ceased to study and raise awareness, even amongst the general public, of what he has termed “genocide” and “memoricide”. At the end of June, he returned to Italy, invited by Alleanza Cattolica – *Foedus Catholicum* of Modena and other organisations in Emilia-Romagna, to undertake a *tour* of lectures in San Giovanni in Persiceto, Piacenza, Pavullo nel Frignano and finally Ravenna.

We met Secher in Modena, on a ‘breathing space’ between one stop and the next, and were able to enjoy a one-to-one conversation: Secher does not limit himself to the rapid back-and-forth of an interview, but sets out the various aspects of the events that took place between 1793 and 1796, presenting data and figures which he has been able to analyse in detail thanks to his legal and economic background: ‘I take a multifaceted approach, where “pure historians” have failed.’ And he begins from afar, in the post-war period, with ‘the collective realisation of crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide’ and the observation that ‘the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century drew on the same political system – the Jacobin one – which involved the Reign of Terror’. But in that case, ‘the horror was sublimated because the Revolution is a national and global myth, whilst everything that was counter-revolutionary was not a subject of study and, in any case, it was said, could not be explored in depth due to a lack of sources’. And also because the *gauche*, which dominated the cultural climate, did not want the myth of the Revolution to be tarnished. It was Meyer who chanced upon the ‘Military Vendée’ whilst conducting research on the Breton nobility. Upon arriving in the areas concerned, he sensed a trauma passed down orally: ‘We were living peacefully in our homes; unjust laws were imposed upon us, and the population, in the name of freedom—particularly religious freedom—rebelled, suffering a veritable martyrdom’.

In the 1980s, Meyer asked his student Secher to seek out first-hand sources, beginning with a ‘core sampling’ exercise in a commune – his own, La Chapelle-Basse-Mer – where he had access to documentation that had previously been off-limits to Meyer: ‘I knew everyone and everyone knew me, because I am descended from one of the families that shaped the identity of the place’. He discovered that the sources confirmed that ancestral trauma and that, contrary to popular belief, ‘the people had not rebelled under pressure from the nobility or the clergy’ (indeed, ‘I found no priest who had spontaneously encouraged the uprising’). If anything, the clergy had educated these peasant folk, who were, in their own way, ‘cultured and aware of their own identity and independence. And some of them passed on the memory that one day the French

army came to carry out a scorched-earth policy'.

The first source to speak is the register of a refractory priest (that is, one who remained loyal to the Pope, refusing to swear an oath to the revolutionary government) who had recorded 600 victims, prompting Secher to compare the population before and during the Revolution: 'a shortfall of 900 people (out of a total of 3,850) emerged. The priest's register shows that 80 per cent of the victims were children, women and the elderly, with fewer adult men'. The second source is even more unexpected: 'The lists drawn up on Napoleon's orders, who in 1808 was stunned by the desolation of the Vendée and established subsidies for the reconstruction of houses: 365 houses destroyed, but what was the total? As a descendant of the notary, I have access to the land registry of the time and can estimate both the total number and the value: 365 out of 1,000, a third of the dwellings, representing 51 per cent of the value.'

The three provinces involved 'have no common identity, save that of a religious nature'. However, there is one common factor: in La Chapelle-Basse-Mer, as throughout the region, Secher found himself faced with a 'rural uprising' in which 'no nobleman, be it Charette or La Rochejacqueline, spontaneously took the lead of the insurgents. All were forced to assume that role. Instead, there is a man of the people acclaimed by 'universal suffrage', Cathilineau'. And what they share is opposition to the Revolution, which 'sought to create the Jacobin "new man"'. The alternative is 'freedom or death'.

The repression was not an isolated episode of a civil war, 'nor was it the isolated decision of a military officer or a member of parliament, but that of the Minister of War', who in turn – as Secher reconstructs the 'chain of command' – received precise orders from the Committee of Public Safety, whose members had 'conceived, approved and implemented a system of extermination'. Three laws in total, passed by the National Assembly. There was therefore a 'plan' spanning 18 months and with a very specific objective: 'to eliminate all the Vendéans, preferably the women because they are the bearers of life, the children because they are future "bandits", and the elderly because they are witnesses and educators'.

In the Age of Enlightenment, innovation also contributed to this aim, at least in theory, but the first experiments in chemical asphyxiation and mass poisoning failed, and a rudimentary form of 'gassing' was resorted to when the population took refuge in a cave 'which the revolutionaries sealed off and smoked out by burning damp leaves'. Secher speaks of a 'proto-industrialisation' of repression, such as the idea of using automated processes to behead several people at once – a single guillotine is not

enough. And in any case, anything is exploited: 'Everyone has heard of the mass drownings on boats in Nantes, but wherever there is water, it is used to drown the rebels'. Horrific scenes described by eyewitnesses from both sides, by survivors, and in military reports. And then the fires, the shootings, the smashed skulls, to kill the 'old world' along with its inhabitants... Any means is acceptable so long as it creates a Vendée without Vendéans – in fact, no longer *Vendée*, but *Vengé*. But the Jacobin legacy has been taken up by the *gauche*, which has not lost the habit of seeking to eradicate Christianity and do away with the 'old man' – even through abortion and euthanasia – in order to create the new man, as if to say: 'if the population does not change, we will change the population... just as in the Vendée', sighs Secher.