A ‘theatre of bloody carnage’: the revolt of Cairo and Revolutionary violence

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It is impossible to disentangle French Revolutionary history from the history of violence. For both contemporary commentators and subsequent historians, the very chronology of the period is defined by its eruptions of mass violence, the *journées* that demarcate the Revolution’s different phases, while the interpretation of that violence has generated some of the historiography’s most heated debates. Without, as some have suggested, reducing the Revolution to killing pure and simple, violence remains, as Jean-Clément Martin and Bronisław Baczko have recently restated, an inextricable element of Revolutionary political culture.¹ Indeed, it is a measure of this preoccupation that Micah Alpaugh’s 2015 study of *Non-Violence and the French Revolution* was widely greeted as a radical departure in the historiography.² And yet, for all the research that has been devoted to Revolutionary violence, that research has tended to revolve around two related but quite separate themes: the relationship between urban, typically Parisian, ‘crowd’ violence and authority, and the difference between Revolutionary violence and violence under the *ancien régime*.³ While the politics of popular violence still provokes debate, there is greater consensus on the latter point, and the difference between Revolutionary violence and earlier forms of Franco-French conflict remains critical to our understanding of the Revolution as a rupture with the past.

With little in the way of technological innovation to distinguish Revolutionary violence from that which preceded it, the basis for that distinction is primarily one of intention, a matter of the more ambitious aims that inspired communities to take up arms after the events of 1789 revealed that popular violence could bring about regime change. As William Beik’s survey of crowd violence from the sixteenth century to the Revolution concludes: ‘the difference between earlier instances of

collective action and the revolutionary instances lay in the new meaning which revolutionary participants attributed to the exercise of violence'.⁴ Certainly, crowd violence targeted many of the same victims – officials, clerics, merchants accused of hoarding – on either side of this caesura and many of the ritualized aspects of popular violence – the mutilation of enemies, the parading of body parts – appear unchanged across two centuries of popular protest. But such similarities are, in this view, superficial. As Donald Sutherland has recently argued, a fundamental difference exists between the massacres that took place in September 1792 and their 'sixteenth-century counterparts' because 'revolutionary atrocities took place in a secular and political context'.⁵

This insistence that the Revolution represents a watershed in the way that collective violence was understood and employed resonates across much of the scholarship on the Revolutionary wars too. Whether those wars are calibrated in terms of scale or conceptualized according to von Clausewitz's 'absolute war', assumed to anticipate later imperialisms or, more controversially, to prefigure the genocides of the twentieth century, Revolutionary warfare is generally seen as both quantitatively and qualitatively different from that which preceded it. The 'master narrative' of modern warfare that begins in 1792 and culminates in the totality of twentieth-century conflict raises, as Roger Chickering has cautioned, 'as many problems as it resolves' and it certainly has its critics, but this narrative remains tenacious nonetheless.⁶ At the most basic level, the creation of the citizen army that emerged from 1793's *levée en masse* continues to define interpretations of this period and more recent work on the cultural history of Revolutionary warfare has tended to reinforce this sense of rupture with the past.⁷ Despite their very different points of departure, David Bell's account of the 'First Total War' and Philip Dwyer's pioneering work on massacres in the Revolutionary wars both arrive at a similar set of conclusions concerning what Bell describes as the 'decline of religion as a cause of hostilities' during the eighteenth century and what Dwyer defines as the 'profoundly secular' nature of Revolutionary repression.⁸ Like Sutherland, Dwyer sees an 'important distinction' between the religiously motivated massacres of the *ancien régime* and the ideologically inspired atrocities of the Revolutionary wars, and this distinction reflects a wider understanding of the Revolution as the dawn of a 'resolutely secular' political modernity.⁹

This interpretation also resonates with the recent imperative to view the Revolution and its wars as global phenomena, projecting and 'pioneering' new forms of imperialism beyond Europe.¹⁰ With this perspective in mind, Pierre Serna has traced the path that led men like Pierre François Boyer from the defence of the *patrie* in the 1790s to the conquest of Algeria in 1830. Boyer fought in Italy and Egypt in the late 1790s and earned his sobriquet, *Pierre le Cruel*, in Spain a decade later before going on to apply lessons learned there to an exceptionally brutal command in Oran in the 1830s.¹¹ If, as Edward Said suggested, 'the line that starts with Napoleon' in Egypt in 1798 continued on throughout the colonial conflicts of the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries, then men like Boyer embody that connection as they carried the violence pioneered in the 1790s across a global stage in the nineteenth century.¹²

Pierre le Cruel's career is a useful point of departure because it exemplifies this tendency to view the Revolutionary wars as a foreshadowing of conflicts to come rather than as a reflection of violence as it was experienced in the 1790s. So, with his career as a cue, and Ute Planert's caution that historians of the Revolutionary wars have taken 'insufficient note of lines of continuity to early modern times' in mind, this chapter examines the violence of the 1790s from the perspective of the men who inflicted most of it: the 'armed missionaries' that Robespierre warned of in January 1792, the Revolution's men in uniform.¹³ It explores how these soldiers calibrated the violence they were called on to commit and how they rationalized it at its worst, in order to understand the experiences that made men like Pierre Boyer cruel. Far from being unambiguously modern in either conception or conduct, the argument here is that these men's experience of violence represents instead a complex interplay between the politics of the Revolutionary present and the cultural memory of past conflicts. One place to begin teasing out that complexity is, with due deference to Said, Cairo and what one French eyewitness described as 'the theatre of bloody carnage' that took place there in October 1798.¹⁴

Cairo, October 1798

It is impossible to say exactly how many died during the 'two days of desperate fighting' that convulsed Cairo from the morning of 21 October 1798 and ended when French troops stormed the al-Azhar mosque the following evening.¹⁵ However, it is possible to say that what began as an anti-taxation demonstration quickly escalated into a popular uprising that threatened to overthrow the occupation that had been established that summer, and that this threat prompted a brutal response.¹⁶ Reports that the Porte had declared war on France certainly contributed to rising tensions, as did a summer of increasingly unpopular French reforms, even if these often opened with 'God has commanded me', but in Cairo, as across much of French-occupied Europe, it was the army's rapacity that finally provoked resistance.¹⁷ From the Rhineland in the mid 1790s to Spain over a decade later, the onset of a French occupation has been compared to 'the arrival of a biblical plague of locusts' or the descent of a wolf pack, and the Egyptian campaign was no different.¹⁸ As elsewhere, the army's arrival was accompanied by a steady stream of 'contributions' and 'requisitions' and, despite orders prohibiting pillage, it is clear from many soldiers' testimonies that a poorly provisioned army provided for itself as best it could.¹⁹ This aspect of the French expedition has never attracted as much attention as Bonaparte's 'enlightened enterprise' in Egypt, but the flip side of French occupation was an order based on wholesale extortion, sweeping exactions, and five or six executions a day in Cairo alone.²⁰ By mid October, tensions were running high in

the capital and the proclamation of a new property tax on 20 October crystallized this discontent. The following morning, a demonstration in the al-Husayn quarter quickly turned to riot after the French general, Dominique Dupuy, was killed while attempting to restore order. His death triggered 'a general revolt' and as looting spread, attacks on Europeans, along with their local sympathizers, continued into the night.²¹ Facing the first real threat to their authority since their arrival in Cairo, the French were caught badly off guard. Bonaparte was not even in the city that morning, but on his return that afternoon preparations for a counteroffensive were quickly set in place.

The gloves came off the following day. Early that morning, Bonaparte ordered his men 'to put anyone found armed to the sword' and as his battle-hardened veterans confronted crowds equipped, for the most part, with sticks and stones, the outcome was inevitable.²² As the troops moved in, corralling the insurgents in the area around the al-Azhar mosque, the repression was, in Lieutenant Chalbrand's words, 'rapid and terrible'.²³ One dragoon wrote: 'we swept through gloomy streets, massacring mercilessly all who were there with weapons in hand', but Jean-Gabriel de Niello Sargy's account suggests that the killing was even more indiscriminate.²⁴ He recalled that anyone found out of doors 'was sacrificed without pity' and this impression is confirmed in François Bernoyer's letters describing 'an awful massacre' as French cavalry, supported by cannon, 'cut large crowds to pieces' throughout the city.²⁵ The climax came in the al-Azhar that afternoon when, after heavy shelling, the French stormed the mosque with orders to 'exterminate everyone' in it.²⁶ The fighting there would be immortalized – and eroticized – a decade later in Girodet's immense *Révolution du Caire*, but for those present at the time, there was nothing romantic about what took place in the al-Azhar. One soldier reported that 'no quarter was shown' in the mosque, while François Vigo-Roussillon grimly concluded: 'there was great carnage' there too.²⁷

Carnage is the term most contemporaries used to describe these events, but if witnesses agreed on the scale of the bloodbath, they differed dramatically as to how many lives were lost. Alexandre Lacorre recalled seeing bodies 'at every step' as he walked through an eerily silent city the next day, but other accounts are less impressionistic and a week later Bonaparte wrote to Paris reporting fifty-seven French dead and between 2,000 and 2,500 civilian casualties.²⁸ This is certainly an underestimate. Lieutenant Laval agreed that 'very few French' died but he put the civilian death toll at close to 6,000, an estimate Auguste Colbert echoed in his letters home, while Corporal François reckoned the revolt cost 283 French dead and wounded, although once again this was dwarfed by his tally of over 4,000 civilian dead.²⁹ More importantly, the killing did not stop there. With the revolt quashed, Bonaparte issued orders on 23 October that any insurgents captured alive were to be taken to the army's stronghold, the Citadel, beheaded and their corpses cast into the Nile.³⁰ Niello Sargy claimed that 300 died this way, including several prominent clerics charged with sedition, but Bernoyer put the number at 2,000;

in either case, the killings were still taking place long after Bonaparte proclaimed 'peace perfectly restored'.³¹

Like many later descriptions of colonial violence, the accounts that survive of this massacre were written from an overwhelmingly Western perspective. Bonaparte's men were prolific letter-writers, diarists, and memoirists and, in contrast to soldiers in subsequent conflicts, they did not flinch from describing the violence they inflicted as well as that which they witnessed.³² By comparison, far fewer Cairenes left a record of these events. However, those that did, like the Arab Christian commentator Nikula al-Turk or his Muslim contemporary Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, describe the scale of the slaughter in very similar terms. For al-Jabarti, the death toll appeared so immense as to be incalculable, while al-Turk's claim that 'at least five thousand Muslims perished' echoes the highest French estimates.³³ The casualty figures differ from one account to another, although ethnicity did little to determine that difference, but the fact remains that somewhere between 2,500 and 8,000 Cairenes died violent deaths in the space of just three days. To set those figures in context, it seems fair to say that the carnage in Cairo represents the largest single loss of civilian life during a decade of Revolutionary violence. Indeed, even the most conservative of those casualty figures, Bonaparte's own, represents a far greater loss of life than the death toll of the bloodiest of Revolutionary *journées*, the 1,200 to 1,400 men and women murdered in Paris during the prison massacres of 2–7 September 1792. To put it another way, almost twice as many Cairenes were killed during those two days in 1798 as Parisians throughout the Terror, in a city half the size of the French capital.³⁴

This was killing on a grand scale, but this very asymmetric violence was neither unique to Egypt nor unprecedented in the 1790s. It was certainly extreme in extent, but after five years of fighting counter-insurgency campaigns against Vendéens and *chouans* in France, *barbetti* in Piedmont, and 'brigands' across occupied Europe, this was an all too familiar way of waging war for the Revolution's soldiers.³⁵ It was especially familiar to those in the Army of the Orient, who had already accompanied Bonaparte into Italy in 1796. Throughout that campaign, Bonaparte's faith in the salutary effects of 'a terrible example' had been constant, and proclamations and even press notices repeatedly promised that resistance would provoke a spectacular reckoning.³⁶ Following the burning of Binasco and the massacre of its men-folk in May 1796, for example, he published a 'Proclamation to the inhabitants of Lombardy' warning: 'Let the example of Binasco open your eyes! Any villages persisting in revolt will share its fate', and his men were as good as his word.³⁷ Across Lombardy and the Veneto, massacre was an accepted means to an exemplary end in 1796 and the French occupation of Egypt was accompanied by the same orders to 'make a terrible example', the same scorched villages, the same trail of 'streets covered in dead'.³⁸ The army's advance through Sharqia province in early October was typical. After suffering light losses to raids launched by 'Arabs howling like wild beasts', Corporal François casually noted that 'we burned 23 villages, the most

rebellious ones ... All of the inhabitants, except the women and children, were put to the sword. More than 900 were put to death.³⁹ Wherever it came, the French response to resistance was immediate and terrible, and in this respect the violence unleashed in Cairo differed from that inflicted on villages like Thévené – where the wounding of one French soldier led to the massacre of an entire village – only in scale.⁴⁰ So much, it might be added, for the ‘paix aux chaumières!’ the Revolution had promised in 1792.

All of the ranks recognized this exemplary logic and congratulated themselves repeatedly on their thoroughness in following it through, at first in the countryside between Alexandria and Cairo and then in the capital. As Lieutenant Chalbrand concluded after the revolt there: ‘the repression was ... terrible, but it impressed upon the Muslims an extraordinary idea of French strength and power and this ... consolidated our domination’.⁴¹ This reasoning was widely shared. Joseph Moiret viewed ‘the severity we deployed’ in equally sanguine terms, concluding that ‘happily for us’ it would deter ‘those who might be tempted or incited to follow its [Cairo’s] example’, while others described it as a ‘lesson’ for all Egypt.⁴² In this sense, there was nothing unusual about the carnage these soldiers wrought in Cairo and none of their accounts attempt to excuse it by reference to the indiscipline or bloodlust that officers sometimes cited to excuse a city’s sacking after a siege. On the contrary, Bonaparte’s order to ‘exterminate’ everyone in the al-Azhar was an atrocity intended to subdue a whole city and, beyond that, an entire country, and its meaning was clear to all of his men. Grenadier Vigo-Roussillon summarized this rationale in stark terms: ‘only terror could keep us in a country where we were few in number and where all the inhabitants were, out of religious fanaticism, our irreconcilable enemies’.⁴³ This was slaughter as strategy, the deliberate use of massacre to consolidate a colonial occupation. And yet, however calculated this carnage might have been, Vigo-Roussillon’s reference to religious fanaticism suggests that there was more to this violence than simply impressing the locals with an object lesson in French military might.

Civilization and fanaticism

According to Henry Laurens, everything the French did in Egypt ‘was done in the name of civilization’: it was, he argues, ‘the key word of expeditionary discourse’.⁴⁴ This may well have been true of the savants who aspired, in Jonathan Israel’s account, to ‘bring Egypt into a new era’ by dint of enlightened *idéologie* and Republican reform and it unquestionably provided French propagandists (and some subsequent commentators) with a suitably selfless excuse for an unprovoked invasion.⁴⁵ This civilizing mission may even have meant something to Bonaparte in his more messianic moments, but spreading ‘civilization’ meant little to most of his men. They had scant time for the savants – officers observed that ‘a kind of fury ... animated the soldiers’ against the intellectuals they blamed for

being in Egypt in the first place – and even less for their highfalutin ideas of enlightened imperialism.⁴⁶ While some officers echoed the official line, most soldiers were sceptical of this civilizing mission and after just a few weeks among this ‘sottish, slavish people’ Joseph Moiret probably spoke for many of his comrades when he concluded that ‘we soon saw the impossibility of civilizing them’.⁴⁷ Whatever other ambitions these men may have entertained in Egypt, and surviving long enough to get home would probably have satisfied most of them after the French fleet was routed at Aboukir Bay, civilizing the Orient was not one of them. Indeed, soldiers rarely mentioned the idea in their journals or letters home, except in so far as they considered Egypt a ‘land where civilization seemed extinguished’.⁴⁸

If the idea of civilization is often absent from these soldiers’ testimonies, the fear of fanaticism features prominently in most accounts of the expedition. That one word, along with its offshoots fanatic, fanatical, fanaticized, recurs repeatedly in their letters and diaries and it encapsulates how these men viewed what Sub-Lieutenant Vertray described as ‘this fanatical and fatalistic people’.⁴⁹ The contrast between Egypt’s antique past and what the French saw as its abject present; the despotism its people supposedly submitted to; the poverty, dirt, and disease they endured; the oppression of its women; the want of wine and the absence of amenable female company: most soldiers attributed some if not all of what they saw as Egypt’s backwardness to Islam’s influence and ‘the moral brutalization’ it supposedly inspired.⁵⁰ Pierre Gerbaud even blamed the ‘astonishing multitude of ugly, useless dogs’ roaming Egypt’s towns on the idiosyncrasies of a religion that supposedly prohibited killing them, before embarking on his own private war on Damietta’s dogs.⁵¹

The French blamed Islam, much more than Mamluk rule, for their alienation in Egypt and this antipathy only increased when the soldiers came face to face with Islam at its most exuberant during Cairo’s celebration of Mawlid that August. Edouard de Villiers du Terrage expressed a common view when he wrote that these devotions ‘inspired me with pity and contempt’.⁵² More importantly, these festivities also inspired fear – fear of the unknown certainly, but also fear of what many of the French saw as Islam’s essential extremism, an absence of restraint that some likened to insanity, especially when it was expressed with the unsettling enthusiasm of the city’s Sufi mystics, ‘holy madmen’, ‘foaming at the mouth ... running the streets ... naked as apes’, that the French described seeing that August.⁵³ For many of the French, Islam appeared to be unreason incarnate, but if some soldiers owed this jaundiced view of Islam as a kind of ‘perpetual delirium’ to the extracts from Volney’s *Voyages en Egypte et en Syrie* that were available in their messes, they were the well-read few.⁵⁴ Instead, for the majority, this intense antipathy was more ingrained than erudite. It stemmed from the ‘disenchantment’ they experienced from the moment they arrived in Egypt and the disconcerting ‘difference of *moeurs* and religion’ they encountered there.⁵⁵ For that reason, Bonaparte’s attempts to draw Islam, or at least its elites, into the Republican fold proved contentious from the start.

From the moment the French arrived in Egypt, Bonaparte had pursued a concerted, if not particularly convincing, attempt to win over Egyptian hearts and minds by appearing to embrace Islam. From his much-mocked declaration that 'we too are true Muslims' on arriving in Alexandria to his orders to show respect for Islam and its adherents, this policy defined the early stages of the expedition and it intensified when the French occupied Cairo in July.⁵⁶ Further proclamations declaring Bonaparte's respect 'for the religion of the Prophet which I love' accompanied the army's arrival in the capital and this policy climaxed a month later when the army was made to mark Mawlid with as much pomp as possible.⁵⁷ Pierre Pelleport claimed that 'nothing was forgotten to persuade the Egyptians that the army had the greatest reverence for the Prophet', although he also admitted that the soldiers privately sniggered at the 'comedy' of it all.⁵⁸ Sniggering may have been a price worth paying if this posturing had succeeded, but it seems clear that few Cairenes were convinced by these attempts to conscript Islam to the French cause. Al-Jabarti, for one, was scathing about Bonaparte's 'incoherent' declarations of devotion, and the Egyptians' adoption of the nickname Ali-Bonaparte was clearly a mark of ridicule rather than respect, even if the joke was largely lost on the French.⁵⁹ More damaging still, this policy also took a toll on the men's morale, their regard for their general, and maybe even their self-respect. All of those orders to avoid offending local religious sensibilities evidently failed because they had to be reissued repeatedly, while the sight of Bonaparte in 'oriental costume' during Mawlid unsettled some in the army.⁶⁰ Lieutenant Chalbrand claimed that many of his men found these 'acts of deference towards mahometanism' 'demeaning' and Joseph Moiret's verdict was even more damning.⁶¹ Reflecting on the pretence the army had been ordered to put on, he recalled his comrades complaining 'that they had not shaken off the prejudices of Europe only to adopt those of the Orient'.⁶² Bonaparte's policy, as his men saw it, of pandering to Islam clearly rankled. It ran counter to their own aversion to Egyptian culture, but perhaps more importantly it offended, as Moiret's remark suggests, the soldiers' sense of themselves as a Revolutionary army, a force freed of the prejudices of the old order and fighting to establish the new. By 1798, that self-image was deeply ingrained.⁶³ It had been forged in the defence of the *patrie* and honed on battlefields across Europe, but its roots lay back in France, in the rhetoric of Republican regeneration and the religious conflicts that had convulsed France since the Revolution began.

From the first major outbreaks of resistance to Revolutionary change in 1790, the new regime routinely attributed any form of popular opposition to 'the clamours of fanaticism', a matter of clerical conspiracy and misguided religious fervour on the part of a 'fanaticized countryside'.⁶⁴ As the new authorities struggled to contain rising disaffection, this analysis became a commonplace in 1792, and when that disaffection exploded into civil war in the Vendée in March 1793 its outbreak was understood in the same terms. For the Republicans sent to repress the rising in the west that spring, the revolt there was represented not as a rural revolt against

enlistment, but as a Manichean struggle pitting liberty against backwardness and bigotry, a war in which the enemy always went into battle swathed in scapulars, urged on by their priests, 'the apostles of fanaticism' in General Turreau's terms, with the promise of a martyr's death.⁶⁵ This image of relentless religious fanaticism and the 'sacred fury' it inspired was a recurring theme in Republican dispatches from the Vendée and it shaped many soldiers' sense of both the nature of the revolt and the kind of repression it warranted.⁶⁶ As one officer wrote from the west of France in August 1793:

It is a great mistake to employ tactics against men who fight, a scapular and a rosary in hand and who hurl themselves against our artillery armed only with sticks ... As long as we wage a war against these fanatics other than that which they wage themselves, we are lost. We must follow their own methods ... We can no longer hope to bring them to reason. We must kill them all, or they will kill us.⁶⁷

This image of the enemy as irrational and implacable, and the orders for a war of 'extermination' that it inspired, marked the Vendée out as radically different from the war France was fighting on its frontiers.⁶⁸ In defining civil war as a war against fanaticism, the Revolution defined it, as Antoine Momoro insisted that autumn, as a conflict in which 'an entire population can be considered an enemy', a crusade in which compromise was inconceivable.⁶⁹

Many historians have argued that the Revolutionary and Imperial authorities criminalized civilian resistance as 'banditry' and 'brigandage', but in defining civil war in this way, Republicans described the opposition they encountered in much more apocalyptic terms.⁷⁰ In this discourse – and it was ubiquitous in 1793 – the fanatic was not simply an outlaw: he, or she, was demonized as something monstrous, a 'ferocious beast', a 'hydra', or described as a disease, a 'gangrene' that could only, as Bertrand Barère insisted that August, be excised with 'fire and the sword'.⁷¹ The Republican elite dehumanized civilian resistance and it seems clear that many soldiers embraced this message wholeheartedly. In their accounts, the civilians in the West appear inherently alien: 'strangers to our *moeurs*, our laws', 'barbarians', or simply inhuman, 'fanatical brigands' fit only to be dealt with 'as one hunts wild boars', as one volunteer claimed in June 1793.⁷² This may explain why soldiers like Corporal François Joliclerc felt able to write home that 'men and women, they will all be run through. They must all perish, all except the little children' or bragged, like Michel Raphanel in a letter to his father, of their intention to 'exterminate all' the Republic's enemies.⁷³ Just as the *levée en masse* began to assemble the largest army Europe had ever seen, Revolutionary discourse radically redefined these soldiers' sense of what they were fighting for and, just as importantly, what they were fighting against. In waging war on religious fanaticism, men like Joliclerc or Raphanel believed they were fighting a crusade in which the laws of war no longer applied.

Neither Joliclerc nor Raphanel ever reached Egypt, but many of their comrades did and they carried all of the preconceptions they had acquired about the nature of

civilian resistance and how to combat it with them from France into Egypt in 1798. Many in the Army of the Orient, from generals like Dumas and Kléber and junior officers like Vaxelaire or Colbert to ordinary soldiers like Louis Bricard, were veterans of the Vendée. More, like Bonaparte himself, had honed these assumptions about enemies armed with 'a dagger in one hand and the crucifix in the other', in Italy during the *triennio*.⁷⁴ For the French, the resistance they encountered in Italy seemed, as one soldier wrote from Lazio in 1798, 'just like the Vendée', and many of his comrades applied the same analogy once they reached Egypt.⁷⁵ Admittedly some, like Dumas, held that the war there was even 'worse than that of the Vendée', but it is the choice of comparison that matters here because this readiness to view wars of conquest in the light of civil war at home determined how these soldiers conceptualized, and ultimately conducted, counter-insurgency in Egypt.⁷⁶ It explains the wary eye the army kept on muezzins from the moment it arrived in Egypt and it makes sense of the uneasy census of Cairo's 300-odd mosques many soldiers made as soon as they reached the city.⁷⁷ As Dominique-Vivant Denon put it, the French saw Cairo's mosques as 'the refuge of crime' and they appraised them accordingly, as they would an enemy army, because this is where they expected opposition to originate.⁷⁸ Inevitably then, when the crisis finally came to a head in October, the identification of responsibility for the revolt was little more than a reflex.

There was unquestionably a religious dimension to the revolt of Cairo. Al-Jabarti admitted as much when he criticized a militant minority among the *ulama* for seizing on the sultan's declaration of war to incite 'the riff-raff' to rise up, but for all that, the revolt of Cairo was a riot that spiralled out of control rather than the eruption of a holy war.⁷⁹ Religious grievances may have fuelled resentment against French rule but, as across occupied Europe, it was the new regime's rapacity, rather than religious zeal, that finally prompted resistance. The civilians who accompanied the armies often recognized as much, although few soldiers saw things this way.⁸⁰ At most, they saw the everyday affronts and unpopular exactions the occupation engendered as minor irritants, 'secondary circumstances ... that came to the aid of the seditious' according to Auguste Colbert, and most of his comrades agreed.⁸¹ Instead, both officers and men looked instinctively to the 'crazed convulsionaries' concealed in the city's mosques and blamed their 'fanatical preaching' and 'seditious sermons' for the events that overtook them on 20 October.⁸² It was a reassuringly familiar explanation, and as in Europe it served to absolve an unwelcome occupation, and its men, of responsibility for the resistance their presence had provoked.

When the fighting had finished, the violence that had begun, according to the French, in the mosques ended there too. Having identified religion once again as the root cause of revolt, the Revolution's soldiers exorcised their anger in the al-Azhar itself. No soldiers described this aftermath in any detail – and that uncharacteristic silence is suggestive in itself – but al-Turk and al-Jabarti did, and their accounts fill that void. While al-Turk confined himself to describing how 'distressed' the city's

residents were 'to see the sacred sanctuary of their mosque violated', al-Jabarti described what that 'profanation' amounted to in despairing detail:

the French trod in the Mosque of al-Azhar with their shoes, carrying swords and rifles ... they ravaged the students' quarters ... They plundered whatever they found in the mosque ... They treated the books and Qur'anic volumes as trash, throwing them on the ground, stamping them with their feet and shoes. Furthermore, they soiled the mosque, blowing their spit in it, pissing and defecating in it. And whoever they happened to meet in the mosque they stripped. They chanced upon someone in the students' residence and slaughtered him. Thus they committed deeds in al-Azhar which are but little of what they are capable of, for they are enemies of the Religion.⁸³

Iconoclasm and pillage were nothing new to these soldiers. The French left a trail of sacked churches, smashed saints' statues, and stolen silverware across Western Europe too. And yet, however accustomed these men were to acts of sacrilege and symbolic violence, all of this desecration and defecation seems like an act of expiation too. For an army that had so self-consciously, as Moiret put it, 'shaken off the prejudices of Europe', the three months that preceded the sacking of the al-Azhar had been an unsettling experience. They had been three months of putting up with a 'victorious general debasing himself to feign religious sentiments contrary to his conscience' and three months of orders to respect a religion most of these men despised.⁸⁴ The ferocity of the violence in the al-Azhar is a measure of the toll this policy finally took and perhaps even a mark of the shame it inspired. It is as if all of that frenetic spitting and shitting and pissing was meant to purge the pollution of proximity to a religion these men found 'repellent' and undo the ignominy of Bonaparte's assertion that 'we too are true Muslims'.⁸⁵

The Revolution's 'rites of violence'

There is much here that seems to prefigure the violence of later colonial campaigns. The Army of the Orient's systematic use of massacre in 1798 seems to foreshadow the atrocities the French employed in Algeria in the 1830s, just as these soldiers' use of the term 'fanatic' to describe their enemies anticipates the idiom colonial officials employed to the same end in British India throughout the nineteenth century.⁸⁶ The 'prose of counter-insurgency', to borrow Ranajit Guha's phrase, appears common to both contexts and in this sense Said was right.⁸⁷ There is a line that connects the French presence in Egypt to these later colonial contexts, and from that perspective this violence does appear precociously modern. However, from the perspective of the soldiers who engaged in this slaughter, that line leads in a very different direction and it points backwards, not forwards, in time. These soldiers arrived in Egypt with their own experiences to draw on and their own entrenched understanding of the relationship between religion and violence. These had been established at home, in their experience of civil war and, beyond

that, in the cultural memory of the confessional conflicts that had convulsed France throughout the early modern period.

Rather than interpreting Revolutionary violence as unequivocally modern, let alone 'profoundly secular', focusing on these soldiers' experiences in the 1790s presents instead lines of continuity that reach back from the repression in Cairo to the civil war in France, a civil war that contemporaries repeatedly conceptualized by reference to the wars of religion. The men of the Revolution may have repudiated the French past, but they knew their history well and they repeatedly invoked it to explain the violence that engulfed them in the 1790s and to justify the extremes they employed in suppressing it. Allusions to Saint Bartholomew's Day, the Michelade, and all the other 'cruelties committed in the wars of religion' loomed large in Revolutionary accounts of the war in the Vendée and the memory of the more recent religious war in the Cévennes proved just as serviceable.⁸⁸ Mathieu Baudran, for example, doubtless disapproved of Louis XIV's *dragonnades* – most good Republicans did – but he still recommended applying them as a model when he was sent west to suppress *chouannerie* in 1795.⁸⁹ History had taught this generation that civil conflict was inherently confessional and they defined their enemies and calibrated their response to them accordingly. In interpreting counter-insurgency as a war waged against religious fanaticism, the Revolution embraced an earlier language of confessional conflict and this language carried within it a whole set of assumptions about the nature of the enemy and the violence it was permissible to deploy against it. The resonance of this language explains the ease with which those orders to 'exterminate' were issued and the enthusiasm with which they were carried out. In defining their opponents as fanatics, these soldiers marked them out as fundamentally different from other combatants. Unlike conventional armies which might be defeated in battle, an enemy inspired by religious fanaticism could never be brought to terms or reasoned with because the fanatic was, by definition, unreasoning, 'imbecilic', 'atrocious and insane'.⁹⁰ Immune to reason and negotiation, the 'fanatic' had forfeited the right to be regarded as a conventional opponent and was reduced instead to a 'semi-savage', a 'barbarian', or worse still, in language that was repeated from the Vendée to Egypt, a 'ferocious beast'.⁹¹ In dehumanizing their enemies in these terms, Republicans rationalized their recourse to extremes of violence that seemed, by the standards of the eighteenth century, to belong to another era.

This is why that final frenzy in the al-Azhar mosque is so revealing. The Revolution's soldiers thought of their enemies as relics from the past and their 'rites of violence' reflect something of that identification of resistance with religious war.⁹² The dehumanization of the enemy on religious grounds; the decision to exterminate those deemed beyond the pale by virtue of their religious beliefs; the singling out of clerics for special retribution; the resort to massacre and mutilation; the casting of corpses into water to be washed away; even that compulsion to desecrate and defile sacred spaces: there is a pattern to this violence and that pattern is predicated on the soldiers' perception of religious difference and the threat it

posed to the order they embodied. However much Revolutionary historians may think of 1789 as ‘the threshold of the modern age’, its ‘year zero’ even, and however much they insist that Revolutionary violence, like the politics of this particular modernity, was radically different and ‘resolutely secular’, these ‘rites of violence’ suggest that the Revolution’s relationship to the past was more complicated.⁹³ These Revolution’s soldiers were not ‘warriors of God’ in the sense that their sixteenth-century predecessors were, but in imagining the wars of the 1790s as a ‘war to the death’ against an enemy inspired by religious fanaticism, these men were fighting their own wars of religion.⁹⁴

Notes

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- 5 Sutherland, ‘Justice and Murder’, p. 133.
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- 9 Dwyer, ‘Violence and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars’, p. 123, and L. Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (London, 1986), p. 28.
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- 24 Anon., *Journal d'un Dragon d'Egypte (14e Dragons)* (Paris, 1899), p. 40.
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- 41 Chalbrand, *Les Français en Egypte*, p. 104.
- 42 Moiret, *Mémoires*, p. 73; François, *Journal*, p. 243; E. G. Saint-Hilaire, *Lettres écrites d'Egypte*, ed. E.-T. Hamy (Paris, 1901), p. 113.
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