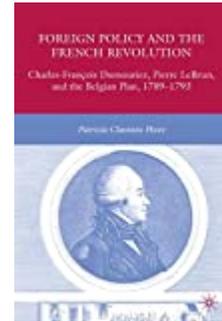




Patricia Chastain Howe. *Foreign Policy and the French Revolution: Charles-François Dumouriez, Pierre LeBrun, and the Belgian Plan, 1789-1793.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 262 S. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-60448-3.



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Dumouriez, LeBrun, and the Foreign Policy of Revolutionary France, 1792-93

Patricia Chastain Howe's central thesis is that the foreign policy of revolutionary France between March 1792 and April 1793 was predominantly determined by the question of Belgium and Liège and controlled by Charles-François Dumouriez and Pierre LeBrun, both of whom favored a "plan" for the construction of a united Belgian and Liégeois Republic. According to this thesis, the pursuit of the "Belgian Plan" was one of the principal causes of the April 1792 declaration of war and a major part in the series of events leading up to the formation of the First Coalition and the war itself. The book is divided into ten chapters; the first three provide the context for Dumouriez's and LeBrun's policies that are developed in the later chapters which follow in chronological order from March 1792 to December 1793.

This book concludes research that was initiated in 1982 as a PhD dissertation and followed in 1986 by an article in *French Historical Studies*. One wonders whether this is the reason that the bibliographic references do not mention the French language works of the past two decades. Apart from the standard (and irrelevant?) refer-

ral to François Furet's *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (1989), the reference to the most recent French historiography is that of the American translation of Jean-Paul Bertaud's *La Révolution armée* (1979). The works of Jan C. A. De Clerck are not cited, nor is Roland Mortier and Hervé Hasquin's 1996 edited volume of the works of Jean-François Vonck.[1] The same holds for Jean-Pierre Bois's biography of Dumouriez, *Dumouriez* (2005), despite the fact that its subject is one of the principal topics of Howe's book. Jean-Yves Guiomar's *L'Idéologie nationale* (1974) and *L'Invention de la guerre totale* (2004) are absent, and the author uses none of my books or numerous articles on the topic of the foreign policy of the French Revolution.[2] This leads Howe to make many statements that are at times contradicted by recent work. Thus the idea that the revolutionaries of 1789 had no precise ideas on the subject of foreign relations and no idea as to the manner in which they could apply the principle of popular sovereignty to the foreign policy sphere contradicts twenty years' worth of writing by French historians and philosophers who specialize in

the Enlightenment (p. 42). Even more surprising, some English language reference works do not appear in the bibliography: thus the works of Emma Vincent MacLeod (*A War of Ideas: British Attitudes to the Wars against Revolutionary France, 1792-1804* [1998]) and Jennifer Mori on the British attitude to the French Revolution (*William Pitt and the French Revolution, 1785-1795* [1997]) have not been used, and David Bell's *The First Total War* (2007) is absent, as are the articles of Tom Kaiser and Gary Savage on Franco-Austrian relations before and during the French Revolution.[3]

To this preliminary criticism of the bibliography must be added the following reservation about sources: it is highly regrettable that the author's (or the editor's) archival reference system does not permit us to go back to the primary sources and will not allow future researchers to develop the subject further. The only particulars are those of the repositories (Bibliothèque Nationale, Archives Nationales, Bibliothèque de Liège, etc.). The series, subseries, and above all the boxes and the files from which the sources originate are not indicated. It is all the more unfortunate, since the author's citations to the papers of Dumouriez and LeBrun raise many important questions and illuminate in an interesting fashion the ins and outs of the politics of the Girondin ministry in 1792. Scholars need to know the precise details regarding this new evidence. Indeed, the author asserts that much of her evidence originates from the papers of Dumouriez and LeBrun, which are housed in different depots and which hitherto have been unexploited by historians, yet since no indication allows the reader to know which archives are being discussed, one justifiably remains unsatisfied (p.3).

Howe suggests that her central thesis on French revolutionary foreign policy in 1792-93 calls into question the "standard interpretation," which is that French policy was the fruit (and the failure) of the emancipatory enthusiasm and ideology of the Girondins toward the Europe of kings and priests (p. 3). This thesis originated among the Montagnards who were eager to associate the Girondins and Dumouriez under the same reprobation. This thesis would be reprised by later historians but was challenged by "revisionist" historians (p. 4). The author suggests here more than she explains: Who were the historians who developed this "standard interpretation"? In which works? Which revisionist historians revised this *doxa*?[4]

The first three chapters succinctly present the respective careers of LeBrun (as journalist and publicist, first in

France, then in Liège and in Belgium) and Dumouriez until 1792, and then broadly summarize the evolution of the foreign policy of revolutionary France from 1789 to early 1792. The presentation of the revolutions in Belgium and Liège is too cursory and results in conceptual confusion and assertions that are somewhat terse. For example, can we say that the Prince Elector of Liège Velbruck, elected in 1772 (the predecessor of Hoensbroeck, who was hounded out of France in 1789), supported the "rights of all of the people of Liège" against the privileged classes and "institutionalized the principle of popular sovereignty" (p. 9)? Can we indiscriminately and interchangeably use the terms "popular sovereignty" and "democracy" in speaking of the movements in Belgium and Liège (p. 20)? Must we make LeBrun a "supporter" of Jean-Jacques Rousseau simply because he insisted on the fact that all political authority is based on the consent of the governed (p. 11)? Despite the established historiography on the Belgian revolution, can we continue to represent, without further precision, the opposition between "Statists" and "Vonckists" as one between "conservatives" and "democrats" (p. 20)? Recent work on Vonck has revealed that his initial program was far from a radical democratic demand. Can we assert that the Josephist reforms of the 1780s were based on the goal of "promoting the well-being of all Belgians at the expense of the privileged" (p. 28)? In the same way, the particular situations of Belgium and Liège with respect to the relations between the great powers after 1756 are undeveloped. We thus do not hear of Joseph II's attempts in the 1780s to exchange the Austrian Netherlands for Bavaria and the opposition that this created. The description of Dumouriez's career before the revolution is itself cursory and would have been much improved by the reading of Bois's biography, particularly with respect to the exact role of Dumouriez in Poland and in Corsica.

The third chapter on the question of foreign relations between 1789 and 1792 similarly contains assertions that should be elaborated or reformulated: it seems to me to be difficult to declare, as does the author, that the majority of the *philosophes*, and Montesquieu above all, considered the direction of foreign policy as an inalienable royal prerogative. It would appear that the author has not directly studied the debates on foreign relations among the Enlightenment philosophers, since in a subsequent chapter she describes a conflict, absolutely fictitious in my opinion, between a moderate conception of foreign relations, supposedly represented by Voltaire and Montesquieu, and a radical conception, of which Rousseau, the physiocrats Mercier de la Rivière and Le Trosne,

Condorcet, and Mably were the supporters (p. 66). In the same way, only a lack of awareness of the debates over Corsica and Geneva at the Constituent Assembly of 1789 could have caused the author to write that the debate of May 1790 over the law of peace and war was the assembly's first attempt to apply the principle of popular sovereignty to foreign relations. Finally, the *Robespierristes* (if this term has a meaning in 1792) were not a "small group of Jacobins ... who were later known as Montagnards" (p. 201n42). I have elsewhere shown in several works that Robespierre's opposition to war in 1791-92 cannot be understood only in terms of political tactics (as the author asserts on p. 107). It must also be understood as a position of principle, largely inherited from the previous debates of the Enlightenment *philosophes*.

If Dumouriez and LeBrun unquestionably had a "Belgian policy" in 1792-93, the premeditated character of this policy before 1792 is far from certain. As the author demonstrates in passing, if the two men collaborated politically in a close manner between August 1792 and April 1793, this collaboration did not exclude differences, sometimes vast. Rather than describing a "Belgian Plan," which assumes a definite and more or less long-term strategy of the two men (together or separately), it is preferable to speak of a Belgian question or Liègeois question on which the two men found themselves sometimes in agreement given their common appreciation of its importance to the foreign policy of revolutionary France. Moreover, the majority of the work on the Belgian and Liègeois revolutions has shown that the idea of an objective and necessary alliance between Belgium and Liège appeared rather slowly in 1790 and would not have created any enthusiasm on either side. It was not until after the crushing of the two revolutions at the end of 1790 that Liègeois and Belgian émigrés in France put forth the idea of the convergence of the two movements under the aegis of the French. It is therefore questionable to present the alliance of the Belgians and the Liègeois as a program that began before the defeat, even if, of course, ties existed between the two movements—as Howe demonstrates, and as had already been proven in the pioneering works of Suzanne Tassier and Orient Lee in the 1930s. This "Belgian policy" cannot, however, be isolated from either the larger question of Franco-Austrian relations or the rejection of the shifting of alliances by large segments of opinion and publicists in France and by the "Favier's heirs" before and during the French Revolution. Here also, recent historiography (by Savage and Kaiser, among others) should have been

used to contextualize the Belgian question.

The chapters that follow are more interesting since they are more centered on the correspondence of Dumouriez and LeBrun, the principal subjects of the author. The book thus contains elements that are relatively new, for example, on the details of the relations between Dumouriez and the Girondins—relations that were not limited to mutual ends. Dumouriez, whose contact with the group was Armand Gensonné, appears as a much more independent actor than has been suggested. At the same time, he was also the person who, for Jacques-Pierre Brissot and Pierre Vergniaud, would put in place their shared policy of rupture with Austria and the satellization of Belgium.

One of the most interesting aspects of the book is its description of the upset that Dumouriez's arrival signifies in the history of the Ministry of Foreign Relations. With Louis XVI being willingly on the sidelines, the assembly had only a loose control over the ministry because of the domination of the Girondins over the diplomatic committee (de facto suspended as the author writes on p. 85). The foreign prerogative of executive power became widely autonomous in the confrontation over the Belgian question, as has already been argued by Guiomar in *L'Idéologie nationale*. In fact, legislative power was almost totally separated from foreign policy by the political union of a parliamentary group (the Brissotins-Girondins) and a ministry (that of Dumouriez, then of LeBrun) that defended an appropriate foreign policy and virtually without debate. Should we see here a consensus between political groups in the assembly, or better a confiscation of the foreign prerogative by the so-called Girondin ministry?

This work calls into question, in a convincing manner, the "enthousiaste" interpretation of Girondin policy in 1792-93. The Brissotins appear less as propagandists than actors who wished to propose a new European strategy for revolutionary France. That being said, in trying to rehabilitate the importance of the specific actions of Dumouriez, the author is sometimes driven to minimize those of the Girondins who were not, despite what is commonly assumed, entirely focused on internal policy battles. The author unquestionably demonstrates that Dumouriez and LeBrun benefited from a large amount of autonomy vis-à-vis legislative power to apply their Belgian and anti-Austrian policies, but one must not consider that the groups at the heart of the Legislature, or of the Convention, were disassociated from what took place in Belgium and Liège. I thus do not believe that we can

state that the Girondins were unaware of the principal political objective of Dumouriez and that they accepted his “plan” as an element of the “crusade for liberty” (p. 59). Similarly, it is possible to be unconvinced of the fact that Danton played no role in the definition of foreign policy at the beginning of the Convention (p. 211n55) simply because one finds no trace of this in the archives and in official correspondence. Years ago Albert Mathiez explained (*Danton et la Paix* [1919]) that if Danton did not play an official role, the nomination of François-Noël and of his stepbrother as agents in London to aid Chauvelin could not have taken place without his backing. Talleyrand and Antoine Talon themselves, nonofficial negotiators and agents in London, were, again according to Mathiez, his influential contacts. Howe makes no reference to this. Moreover, she does not evoke the role of Danton in the secret negotiations with the Prussians at the time of Valmy, making Dumouriez the only actor in the matter, something that needs to be better established or, at the very least, discussed.

The analysis of the context of the decree of November 19, 1792, is equally worth notice. The author clearly demonstrates that it was not the propaganda decree that the English counterrevolutionaries wanted to see. But she overlooks the debate in the Convention concerning Article 3 of the decree of December 15 that excluded certain categories of the population from the electoral assemblies in Belgium. The opposition of Georges Couthon and Robespierre to Vergniaud does not appear.

In chapter 8, the author clarifies the maze of attempted negotiations to avoid general war in December 1792 and January 1793. It was at this time that LeBrun distanced himself from Dumouriez, the former having come to support Franco-British negotiations, the latter seeking above all to control French policy in Belgium. The actions of LeBrun are once more emblematic of the autonomization of executive power with respect to foreign policy. The minister almost single-handedly determined negotiations in progress; the assembly was unable to control their evolution. Similarly, the author’s description of the slide of the assembly and of LeBrun toward a position favoring an independent Belgian republic over an annexationist position is entirely enlightening. The actors did not share *a priori* positions on this or that form of relations between France and Belgium, but rather de-

veloped their positions according to the changing military and diplomatic context. From this point of view, the author’s assertion that the annexation of Belgium was not the result of a preconceived “imperialist” plan is completely convincing (p. 154). However, it is less certain that the votes for annexation took place “fairly” (p. 157).

Two details to conclude: Nantes is not in the Vendée department, but rather in Loire-Inférieure. Also, the assertion, echoed without verification by the majority of historians, that Goethe had “immediately” seen Valmy as a turning point in history does not take into consideration that *La Campagne de France* from which the famous citation is taken was published in 1822, which is to say thirty years after the events, which makes the self-fulfilling prophesy somewhat less impressive (p. 100).

In conclusion, while this work has many undeniable strengths, in particular its treatment of the correspondence between Dumouriez and LeBrun, which has clarified the history of French foreign relations in 1792-93, the absence of references to recent historiography leads the author to interpretations that are at times unconvincing and to unfortunate approximations.

Notes

[1]. Roland Mortier and Hervé Hasquin, eds., *Jean-François Vonck (1743-1792), Études sur le XVIII^e siècle* 24 (Bruxelles: Éditions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 1996); and Jan C. A. De Clerck, *Jean-François Vonck. Juriste et chef démocrate de la Révolution belge (1743-1792)* (Bruxelles: Hayez, 1992).

[2]. See my *Fraternelle Universelle et Internationale (1713-1795). Les cosmopolitiques du droit des gens* (Paris: Kim, 1998).

[3]. Tom Kaiser, “From the Austrian Committee to the Foreign Plot: Marie-Antoinette, Austrophobia, and the Terror,” *French Historical Studies* 26 (2003): 579-617; and Gary Savage, “Favier’s Heirs : The French Revolution and le Secret du Roi,” *Historical Journal* 41 (1998): 225-258.

[4]. The chapters that follow admittedly contain clarifications and the “standard version” seems to be that of Albert Sorel, afterward taken up by others, including Furet.

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