

The French Revolution and Diplomatic Practice

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ABSTRACT

Contrary to the historiographical commonplaces that consider the revolutionary period as a diplomatic void, diplomacy under the Revolution falls into three clearly distinct periods: while almost intangible under the constitutional monarchy (1789-1792), French diplomacy was at the outset structurally obstructed at the beginning of the Republic (1792-1795), before gradually being militarized under the Directory and the Consulate (1795-1804). As a result, although republican diplomatic practice was initially distinguished by a genuine art of compromise, it later stood out as much by its intransigent defence of national dignity as its desire to negotiate according to the reciprocal interest of the French nation and European peoples. This diplomacy of national sovereignty should therefore not be confused with a vehicle for revolutionary propaganda: more than an “art of negotiation” in the service of monarchs, it was redefined and reevaluated as a genuine science of European national interests.



Bassville's assassination (french agent in Rome) at a banker's, january 13th 1793. Ink and feather, gray wash.

It is generally agreed that the messianic ideal of the Revolution on principle excluded compromise and diplomatic dialogue. As such, the diplomats of the Revolution have often been reduced to a vague network of Jacobins, and their practice to proselytism. Contrary to this persistent notion of a diplomacy that was undermined because of its

subversiveness, recent research has shown that this diplomacy did not so much seek to convert foreign peoples to revolutionary principles, as to convince their governments to recognize national sovereignty. The diplomatic expression of this change in sovereignty was in fact the primary challenge of revolutionary diplomacy: how to represent the king *and* the nation (1789-1792), and then a nation *without* a king (1792-1804) in a monarchical Europe?

Because the constitutional monarchy remained a regalian monopoly, diplomacy during this period was thoroughly isolated from the political revolution: since its personnel had not been purged nor its codes remodeled, ambassadors continued to represent only the king, to the exclusion of this nation whose political legitimacy they contested in an effort to strip it of any diplomatic credibility.

Beginning in the summer of 1792, the republicanization of diplomacy took place less by way of a partial democratization of its apparatus, than by a radical redefinition of its norms, which were henceforth based on republican virtues, at the expense of the aristocratic *habitus* specific to “the art of negotiation.” Simplicity in representation and frankness in negotiation should therefore replace the pomp and duplicity of the Ancien Régime’s diplomacy, for it was henceforth the effectiveness of the negotiation that took precedence over the vanity of representation. Republican “straight talk” should not, for all that, be confused with revolutionary preaching. Although the decree of April 13, 1793 made the principle of reciprocal non-intervention and the prohibition of revolutionary proselytism the foundation of revolutionary diplomatic practice, ministerial instructions nevertheless stressed the need to use diplomacy as a counter-propaganda tool to restore “republican dignity,” which had been debased by counter-revolutionary propaganda. The challenge for agents was thus to reconcile the requirement for republican firmness with the imperative of diplomatic moderation, in order to use the diplomatic arsenal to win the Republic’s right to exist in Europe.

Aside from the case of the four agents (Mangourit, Genet, Bassville and Soulavie), who are still cited as being emblematic of its incompetence, insolence and incoherence, republican diplomacy distinguished itself through an art of compromise that should be considered neither as a compromise of principles with monarchical customs, nor as an abdication of republican identity: insertion within the European order necessarily required respecting the diplomatic codes that the Republic could not unilaterally overthrow without taking the risk of diplomatic marginalization, with which its agents were confronted in spite of themselves. In fact, although their practice was marked by a subtle balance between republican values and diplomatic propriety, the majority of republican diplomats were nevertheless treated as pariahs, ignored and isolated at best, and banished and persecuted at worst. For lack of accreditation, these agents were consequently unable until 1796 to either truly represent—or fully negotiate in the name of—a government that the monarchies sought to render both invisible and silent on the European diplomatic stage.

It was the military successes of the Grande Nation under the Directory that gave this republican diplomacy, which had been obstructed until then, its rightful place in Europe. If diplomatic agents sought to impose themselves onto European monarchies through the blackmail of military retaliation, it was because their primary duty had always been to assist French armies. By transforming diplomatic information into military intelligence, revolutionary wars contributed to redefining diplomacy from a means of negotiation into one of waging war, with diplomats being reconverted into spies in the service of generals. In doing so, they brought about a kind of militarization of diplomatic practices, for although negotiations only succeeded when the Republic was in a position of strength, they certainly served to bless France’s military expansion in Europe. Consequently, it was this “gunboat diplomacy” that, from the Italian Campaign (1796) to the Treaty of Amiens (1802), authorized generals broadly and Bonaparte in particular to take over negotiations, at the expense of diplomatic agents, in order to dictate peace on their own terms.

The primary republican legacy is less this one-time militarization of the diplomatic apparatus than the permanent

depersonalization of diplomatic relations. By extracting it from the dynastic logic specific to royal diplomacy, the Revolution made it possible to put diplomacy in the exclusive service of this “public thing,” which in the original sense of the word defines the Republic. In its republican version, the purpose of diplomacy was no longer simply to reconcile monarchs, but first and foremost to work towards the convergence and reciprocity of the interests of different peoples. If republican diplomats had the duty to represent the singularity of the French nation abroad, they should negotiate only according to the plurality of these national interests, which is to say according to those interests that are shared by all European nations, which they must force out into the open by “sounding” these nations in their political, economic, moral, and cultural dimensions, by way of investigations carried out by the government.

This redefinition of the essence and vocation of diplomatic practice explains why, in the early nineteenth century, the neologism “diplomacy” could be defined as a genuine science: “the science of the relations and interests between powers,” according to the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie* (1798), which is to say a science that combines the study of the diplomatic history of Europe in general, with that of the political economy of each nation in particular. The diplomat could subsequently no longer be considered a simple practitioner of what was until then only the “art of negotiation”: he claimed to be, and had a duty to be, a genuine expert of this hitherto unknown science.

Because it had to reinvent diplomacy without a monarchical foundation and on this basis of national interests, the Revolution enabled nations to become, if not the actors, then at least one of the central concerns of diplomatic dialogue.

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