

The gender of the counter-revolution during the nineteenth century

Alexandre DUPONT

ABSTRACT

The role of women in the counter-revolution during the nineteenth century is unexpected in light of the gendered conception of social relations supported by this political family. It defended a society inspired by the Ancien Régime, one that was based on Catholicism and monarchy, as well as traditionalist social frameworks and the upholding of a patriarchal model. Aside from their importance on a symbolic level through dynastic, religious, or national incarnations, counter-revolutionary women enjoyed a fairly large freedom of action that appeared in various domains. While a number of these activities fell within the domains to which women were traditionally confined—the family, care activities, etc.—they also intervened in multiple ways on the political scene by taking up arms, or through petitions or fundraising. In the end, the counter-revolution paradoxically provided women with the capacity to act, with its traces visible during the twentieth century in the conservative and Catholic movements that were the heirs to the counter-revolution.



Bordalo Pinheiro, “Revolta da Maria da Fonte” (engraving), in *A Ilustração*, 1846, v. II, p. 71.

The counter-revolution, a structuring political culture throughout the nineteenth century in Western Europe and especially in the Catholic countries surrounding the Mediterranean Basin, granted women a paradoxical role. Counter-revolutionaries, who were partisans of a system inspired by the Ancien Régime, and preoccupied with maintaining the subjection of women in both household and society, nevertheless granted women considerable leeway.

This paradox is partially rooted in the symbolism and representations of counter-revolutionary movements since 1789. Princesses had a large role in legitimist pantheons. While Marie-Antoinette (1755-1793) represented an early

and transnational figure in this devotion to queens and princesses persecuted by the Revolution—which took the form of written and artistic production exalting them—the phenomenon continued throughout the nineteenth century, as demonstrated by the case of Madame Royale (1778-1851), the Orphan of the Temple. These princesses were nevertheless far from being simple passive foils. Maria Theresa of Portugal (1793-1874) and Maria das Nieves of Portugal (1852-1941) in Spain, Caroline de Bourbon-Sicile, Duchesse de Berry (1798-1870) in France, and Maria Sophia of Bavaria, Queen of the Two Sicilies (1841-1925) in Italy, physically engaged in the struggle for the Restoration, thereby embodying the cause in the eyes of their partisans.

This symbolic importance of women within the counter-revolution was also connected to the growing devotion to the Virgin Mary in the Catholic world during the nineteenth century, a rise that was crowned by the proclamation in 1854 of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. In a political culture marked by Catholicism, the Virgin Mary became an international guardian figure, seconded by national incarnations (Our Lady of the Pillar, Our Lady of Lourdes), who were joined with native heroines: Jeanne d'Arc in France, Agustina de Aragón in Spain, etc. In 1799, the anti-French insurrections took place to the cry of "Viva Maria" in Tuscany, while during the two Carlist Wars in Spain (1833-1840 and 1872-1876), the legitimist armies were placed under the protection of the Virgin.

Women therefore played a special role in the counter-revolutionary uprisings and civil wars waged by legitimists. Their presence in armed counter-revolution took two forms. It firstly translated into the taking up of arms. While limited, this form of action was telling. It was present during Maria da Fonte's revolt in Portugal in 1846—which was launched by women and led to the Patuleia or Little Civil War (1846-1847)—in addition to the anti-unitary uprising in Southern Italy during the 1860s, in which Michelina di Cesare (1841-1868) became a figurehead. More broadly, women especially had a logistical function in counter-revolutionary civil wars, and provided a foundation for movements often based on guerilla warfare, for which the support of local communities was crucially important. The Vendée, Douro, Navarre, and Mezzogiorno were its primary incarnations. The role of women in welcoming and supplying soldiers raised the paradox of their condition within the counter-revolution: confined to domains corresponding to a gendered conception of roles, they nevertheless enjoyed genuine autonomy and recognition for their action.

It was as such—by virtue of the education of children—that they were considered to be drivers of family loyalty to the cause. The transmission of political engagement consequently fell to them, although discourses emphasized male transmission. This mission also tasked them with bearing the memory of past combat, and it was women who took on the task of putting the action of their fathers, brothers, or husbands into writing, as was the case in France with the marquise de La Rochejaquelein (1772-1857) or Victoire de Kermel (1824-1911), the wife of General Henri de Cathelineau (1813-1891).

Religion and charitable work was another field of action for women in the counter-revolution: they took their place in the dual context of traditional feminine investment in the charitable activities of the Catholic Church, as well as engagement in charity by women from traditional elites during the nineteenth century, particularly the nobility. They became a hub for activities associated with the concept of care—helping the war-wounded, poor, and weak—within a paternalist system. This investment also reveals the class dimension governing the action of counter-revolutionary women, as women from the nobility or the bourgeoisie enjoyed a broader capacity for action.

Women thus took on a special role, which translated into a fairly remarkable freedom of action in view of the European context, in which their political role was very often denied. For example, a number of studies have shown their considerable engagement in fundraising for certain causes, particularly Peter's Pence, which was intended to help the papacy. They were also at the forefront of the struggles to preserve the social foundation of the Catholic Church, as demonstrated by their strong engagement in the petition campaign against freedom of religion in Spain in 1869. While they still lacked the right to vote, they nevertheless intervened in the public arena and political debates through these petitions and their fundraising efforts transmitted by the press.

As a result, despite a regressive conception of political action and the role of women, the counter-revolution represented a place of action for them, which appeared in the reincarnations of this political family during the twentieth century in the Catholic and conservative movements. Catholic women in France and Italy, for instance, engaged in leagues to combat the broadening of suffrage to women during the first decade of the twentieth century.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

COVA, Anne, DUMONS, Bruno, *Femmes, genre et catholicisme. Nouvelles recherches, nouveaux objets (France, XIX^e-XX^e siècles)* (Lyon: LARHRA-RESEA, 2012).

DELLA SUDDA, Magali, "Une activité politique féminine conservatrice avant le droit de suffrage en France et en Italie. Sociohistoire de la politisation des femmes catholiques au sein de la Ligue patriotique des Françaises (1902-1933) et de l'Unione fra le donne cattoliche d'Italia (1909-1919)," in *Genre & Histoire* 5 (2009), posted online on 11/28/2009, consulted on 05/29/2015. <http://genrehistoire.revues.org/879>.

MARTIN, Jean-Clément, *La révolte brisée. Femmes dans la Révolution française et l'Empire* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2008).

Source URL:

<https://ehne.fr/encyclopedia/themes/gender-and-europe/gender-and-revolution-in-europe-19th-20th-century/gender-counter-revolution-during-nineteenth-century>