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“Toutes les Femmes de France”: Female Political Mobilization and the Ligue Antisémitique Française, 1899

I will be looking at female mobilization within the turn-of-the-century French antisemitic movement, which has traditionally posed a problem for historians. On the one hand, the movement itself was ideologically antifeminist, with stable and traditional gender roles seen as a crucial weapon against the decadence of the French state.¹ At the same time, however, the movement actively sought out female participants. Women responded to these appeals by joining leagues, attending meetings, or contributing in other ways.² This paradox, seen also in later right-wing movements in France and elsewhere, merits further study – why (and how) do women become involved in movements that ostensibly reject female political activity, and why do such movements seek out female members? In this paper, I will address the first of these questions by examining female mobilization in the Ligue Antisémitique Française (LAF), focusing in particular on female mobilization during the siege of the League’s headquarters in the summer of 1899.

The LAF was the largest and most infamous of the French antisemitic leagues, largely because of its association with public political violence. Rioting, armed demonstrations, and street brawling comprised an integral part of the LAF’s political toolkit, and martial or otherwise violent language and imagery pervaded the columns of the league’s newspaper, *L’Antijuiif*.³ This merging of politics and violence was largely the work of the LAF’s founder, Jules Guérin, who imbued the league with his own carefully created persona as a brawny political truth-teller who loved the French people as he hated Jews, foreigners, and the rich. Guérin’s charisma fascinated his political opponents, who described him as “strong as a bull” and marveled that his followers

would die for him, and it positively enthralled his supporters, one of whom wrote that Guérin was “more than vigorous,” with formidable biceps.⁴ Such descriptions of Guérin should be read as indicating not simply physical power but also sexual potency, and Guérin’s implied virility, like his physical strength, should be seen as a metaphor for the virility of the league itself. Historians of turn of the century France have noted a cultural obsession with virility, in terms of physical force and masculine sexual potency, rendered acute by a widespread fear of national and individual degeneration in a troubling modern world.⁵ Nationalists and antisemites such as Guérin capitalized upon this fear and touted their own masculinity, and by extension that of their league’s members.⁶ To belong to the LAF, then, was to be a true man, physically threatening and sexually potent.

Given the centrality of masculinity in the mentality of the LAF, it is striking that, as historian Stephen Wilson points out, women were an integral part of the league, as supporters and even full members.⁷ Citing the observations of antisemite Raphaël Viau, Wilson attributes much of this female interest in the league to sexual thrill induced by the LAF’s violent and vigorous reputation.⁸ It is problematic, however, to offer such a simplistic explanation for women’s involvement in the movement, especially given the number and range of women who joined the LAF or otherwise participated in LAF action. Nor does it account for the LAF’s recruitment of women as members and supporters.⁹ According to police records, in October 1900, ten percent of the 910 members of the LAF were female.¹⁰ Women also supported the LAF financially and through participation in grassroots action such as letter-writing campaigns and boycotts. This is not to say, however, that women’s involvement in the LAF was identical to that of their male peers; male and female members played distinct, complementary roles, akin to

what historian Claudie Lesselier has noted in the present-day French National Front.¹¹ Most notably, women in the LAF avoided public action, especially demonstrations or riots that frequently ended in confrontations with the police. While police agents noted female participation in marches and even demonstrations organized by other leagues, there is only one instance of women joining an LAF public action, and it took place under undeniably exceptional circumstances.

For forty days in August and September 1899, Guérin staged his most ambitious public action: the siege of “Fort Chabrol,” the headquarters of the LAF, on the rue de Chabrol in Paris. Guérin and thirteen league members barricaded the buildings’ doors, refusing to admit the police, who sought to arrest Guérin on an unrelated matter. The police responded by blockading the building, effectively besieging it. Guérin’s action was regarded with indifference by the Parisian public and hostility by other nationalist and antisemitic groups.¹² Yet the members of the LAF, male and female, turned out to aid Guérin in any way possible. The Fort Chabrol seige provides useful examples of conventional and unconventional female antisemitic mobilization, as female league members and supporters tested limits of participation.

In late August 1899, a feminist and nationalist league, the Union Nationaliste des Femmes Françaises (UNFF), addressed an open letter to the Minister of the Interior Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau, in which they called upon him, in the name of the women of France, to “put an end to the drama happening at the rue de Chabrol.”¹³ To let the men of Fort Chabrol starve would be an act of barbarism on par with the Prussian siege of Paris in 1871. Therefore, “all the women of France” (“toutes les femmes de France”) begged him, in the name of humanity to spare these men. When the letter went unanswered, the

women adopted a more direct approach. Over the next days, the UNFF collected signatures on a petition to be delivered to the wife of President Emile Loubet.¹⁴ On August 27, four UNFF members traveled to Rambouillet, outside Paris, to meet with Madame Loubet, deliver their petition, and ask her to intercede.¹⁵ This effort was also fruitless – Madame Loubet was busy, and the women delivered the petition to an aide.¹⁶ In a meeting two days later, UNFF members, along with at least one female member of the LAF, decided to wait for a response before taking further action. One member suggested that they demonstrate, but the idea was quickly rejected.¹⁷

The UNFF's actions represent conventional forms of female mobilization at the end of the nineteenth century. Letter-writing, to politicians or other prominent figures, was quite common, as it afforded a measure of privacy in political action.¹⁸ Petitions, too, allowed women to demonstrate their support for a political movement without joining a league. Finally, the very existence of the UNFF demonstrates the willingness of some women to join political leagues, as well as the ways in which leagues cooperated or collaborated on common projects. Despite the willingness of the members of the UNFF to engage in these forms of mobilization and even to push the boundaries off conventional behavior by personally delivering their petition, they nevertheless stopped short of demonstrating, even in response to such an unusual situation as the siege of Fort Chabrol. Another group of women, however, did participate in a potentially violent evening march during the seige, albeit in a suggestively limited way.

On August 24, two men and a woman circulated a petition among the women manning booths in the central market of Paris imploring them, in the name of humanity and female tenderness, to participate in a public demonstration at Fort Chabrol that night

and to bring food for Guérin and his men.¹⁹ Female vendors were known as the *dames de la Halle*, the “women of the market,” and a century earlier during the French Revolution, such women had been notoriously eager to participate in street violence. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, this was no longer the case – the *dames de la Halle* had a syndicate and bylaws that forbade them from participating in public action as a corporate body, a fact of which the LAF seems to have been unaware.²⁰ The LAF’s appeal was thus met with a marked lack of enthusiasm from the vendors, even as sympathetic newspapers optimistically predicted that 2000 women would demonstrate.²¹ One *dame de la Halle*, Madame Suppy, angrily told the police that “under these circumstances, no respectable (“honnête”) woman would allow herself to take part in this demonstration.”²² The march ended up attracting 600 men and only a dozen women, of whom only four were *dames de la Halle*.²³

The *dames de la Halle* demonstration was thus, for the most part, a resounding failure. The LAF had not followed the standard protocol for inter-organizational action when planning the march – that is, the LAF members behind the march had not approached the leaders of the women’s syndicate to organize a joint action but had instead naively counted on its support, even though the vendors’ bylaws prohibited this sort of mobilization.²⁴ Furthermore, given Suppy’s comment, it seems likely that the *dames de la Halle* felt that demonstrating in this manner was not something that “respectable” (“honnête”) women did, at least not in this political context. This reluctance to become involved in confrontational political action, seen also among the women of the LAF, makes the presence of that handful of women the night of August 24 startling, suggesting as it does a new form of mobilization. A week later, the increasingly

worried members of the LAF considered a new plan to save their leader. Still waiting for a response to the UNFF's petition, they decided that, if one was not forthcoming, both male and female members would come together in a huge demonstration intended to distract the police and allow for Guérin's escape.²⁵ This demonstration never happened, but the willingness of female members to consider it hearkens back to the willingness of the female demonstrators of the night of August 24 to potentially jeopardize their reputations as "respectable women" by marching in support of the men of Fort Chabrol.

Why the change? The answer could lie in the perception, raised earlier, of national decline and crisis. Examining the Catholic women's leagues of the early twentieth century, historian Magali Della Sudda has suggested that a major reason women who were previously politically indifferent were willing to join these leagues was because of a perception of national crisis brought about by secularization.²⁶ Della Sudda's argument for female politicization in the early twentieth century offers a model for understanding women's involvement in the antisemitic movement in 1899. Antisemites felt that they were living in a time of crisis brought about externally by military weakness and internally by Jewish political and economic control over France. For the LAF, the Fort Chabrol incident represented that crisis brought to a fever pitch. It is perhaps out of a need to respond to this crisis that female members of the league were willing to take tentative steps outside of the bounds of conventional forms of political mobilization. Marie Maugeret, one of the leaders of the UNFF and a signatory of the league's initial letter, certainly believed in such a crisis. In an editorial published in the UNFF's newspaper on September 5, she equated the situation in 1899 with the Terror of 1793, with France in a state of "auto-terrorization," with the parliamentary government

oppressing the French people.²⁷ Guérin and his ilk, she claimed, were among the few willing to stand up for what was right; the people, women especially, if indifferent initially, could not stand by and watch them be destroyed. Indeed, more was at stake than the death by starvation of a handful of men. For Maugeret, Guérin had become every Frenchman (or woman) disturbed by the modern state of events. His rightful defense of his domicile, she concluded, was in fact a defense of the national domicile, imperiled France. Under these circumstances, perhaps even a respectable woman would participate in a demonstration, joining her male counterparts in their seductive political violence.

¹ See for example Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 116-118; Stephen Wilson, *Ideology and Experience: Antisemitism in France at the Time of the Dreyfus Affair* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982), 190; Christine Bard, ed., *Un Siècle d'antiféminisme* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 56-58. It has been argued that nationalism on the right and left alike is, at its core, antifeminist. See for example, Karen Offen, "Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France," *American Historical Review* 89 (1984), 661-662.

² Willa Silverman, "Fin-de-siècle Amazons: Antidreyfusard Women and the Affair," in *Intolerance and Indignation: l'affaire Dreyfus, actes des colloques des universités de Columbia et de Georgetown*, ed. Jean-Max Grieu, 199-206 (Paris: Editions Fischbacher, 1999), 204; Wilson, *Ideology and Experience*, 596.

³ For examples, see *L'Antijuif*, 27 April 1902; *L'Antijuif*, 9 July 1899.

⁴ Joseph Reinach, *Histoire de l'Affaire Dreyfus*, Volume II (Paris: Editions Robert Lafont, 2006), 172; *L'Antijuif*, 26 November 1899.

⁵ On virility and degeneration, see Christopher Forth, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Annalise Maugue, *L'Identité masculine au tournant du siècle* (Paris: Rivages, 1897); and Robert Nye, *Masculinity and Male Honor in Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). On fears of degeneration generally, see Philip Nord, *The Politics of Resentment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 409-464 and Debora Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 81-83, among others. On fears of decadence and degeneration among radical nationalists, see Michel Winock, *Nationalism, antisémitisme et fascisme en France* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 22-23, among others.

⁶ See Forth, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood*.

⁷ Wilson, *Ideology and Experience*, 190.

⁸ Wilson, *Ideology and Experience*, 190. The memoir is entitled *Vingt ans d'antisémitisme* (Paris: E. Fasquelle, 1910). Sexualized police descriptions of female league members as "fanatical for Guérin" echo this assertion. See for example APP Ba 1108, 6 July 1900.

⁹ APP Ba 1108, 27 June 1899. In particular, the LAF solicited female attendance at sectional and general meetings. Police records show, for example, that a July 27, 1899 meeting of the First and Second Arrondissement Sections of the LAF had 53 attendees, among which were three women.

¹⁰ APP Ba 1108, 23 October 1900. Figures for league membership are notoriously difficult to pin down, as police agents never managed to acquire any sort of master list of names and Guérin exaggerated membership numbers. See Wilson, *Ideology and Experience*, 188.

¹¹ Claudie Lesselier, "Far-Right Women in France: The Case of the National Front," in *Right-Wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists around the World*, eds. Paola Bacchetta and Margaret Power (New York: Routledge, 2002), 127-140.

¹² AN F⁷ 12462, 25 August 1899; AN F⁷ 12462, 14 September 1899; APP Ba 1109, 31 August 1899.

¹³ *L'Intransigeant*, 26 August 1899.

¹⁴ *L'Intransigeant*, 27 August 1899.

¹⁵ AN F⁷ 12462, 27 August 1899

¹⁶ APP Ba 1109, 29 August 1899; *L'Intransigeant*, 29 August 1899.

¹⁷ APP Ba 1108, 29 August 1899.

¹⁸ On letter-writing during the Dreyfus Affair, see Ruth Harris, "Letters to Lucie: Spirituality, Friendship, and Politics during the Dreyfus Affair," *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Fall 2005): 601-627; Jeanne Humphries, "The Dreyfus Affair: A Woman's Affair," *Historical Reflections* 31, no. 3 (2005): 433-443; Françoise Blum, "Itinéraires féministes à la lumière de l'Affaire," in *La postérité de l'Affaire Dreyfus*, ed. Michel Leymarie, 93-103 (Lille Villeneuve d'Asq : Septentrion, 1997); and Elisabeth Malleier, "'A Emile Zola – Les jeunes filles de Vienne' : Die 500 Mädchen aus Wien oder : 500 gegen 4.000," *L'Homme Z. F. G.* 10 (1999) : 91-100.

¹⁹ *L'Intransigeant*, 26 August 1899; APP Ba 1109, 24 August 1899.

²⁰ *Le Matin*, 25 August 1899.

²¹ *La Libre Parole*, 24 August 1899; APP Ba 1109, 24 August 1899.

²² APP Ba 1109, 24 August 1899.

²³ *Le Matin*, 25 August 1899.

²⁴ APP Ba 1109, 24 August 1899; *Le Matin*, 25 August 1899.

²⁵ AN F⁷ 12462, 31 August 1899.

²⁶ Magali Della Sudda, "Une activité politique féminine conservatrice avant le droit de suffrage en France et en Italie. Socio histoire 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)" (Ph.D. diss., Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris), 2007).

²⁷ *Le Féminisme chrétien*, 5 September 1899.