

# Establishing republican order in rural areas: actions taken by the Republican Guard's mobile columns in the Cisalpine Republic (1797-1798)

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Ancien Régime collapsed northern Italy during spring 1796. This brought both brutal and unprecedented consequences. They were brutal because linked to the military victory led by General Bonaparte and his armies, and not due to any internal government crisis, as was the case in France just years earlier.<sup>2</sup> This event created unprecedented spaces for popular participation in the heart of a new republican city, which was modelled on the French. The Year III Constitution was meant to become - with a few slight variations - the fundamental law of the new Cisalpine Republic, which was founded in 1797. Most importantly, a daily reappropriation of the revolutionarian habits was being seen and, in doing so, becoming the conveyers of democratisation and republicanism of the previous society.<sup>3</sup> The new Republic was born, through the prism of the - and sometimes cynical - interests, of the French occupying power, the suffering inflicted by the war devastation, in a political framework in which limits were set by the Grande Nation.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, it is still true that the coming of the Revolution greatly altered the citizens everyday life and constituted a profound mutation towards a new area,<sup>5</sup> in which the national guard's creation and establishment made it one ground-breaking innovation.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas it was formerly assigned to professional forces or to city militia and organised in the fashion of the Ancien Régime corporations,<sup>7</sup> the responsibility of maintaining the

<sup>1</sup> Methodological note of the author: all the sources of archive, in Italian, have been translated into English.

<sup>2</sup> The circulation and penetration of the revolutionary message in Italy have been repeatedly studied: Godochot, *La Grande Nation*, and Capra, *Letà rivoluzionaria e napoleonica*. However, the solidity of the political system of Ancien Régime has never been questioned, see: De Francesco, *L'Italia di Bonaparte*, pp. 3-13. Bertrand, Frétygné, Giacone, *La France et l'Italie*, pp. 65-77.

<sup>3</sup> On relations between the Great Nation and the Cisalpine Republic: Zaghi, *Il Direttorio francese*. De Francesco, 'An unwelcome sister republic', pp. 211-215.

<sup>4</sup> This aspect has been sufficiently emphasized by classical historiography: Zaghi, *Il Direttorio francese*. Sciout, *Le Directoire*. See also De Francesco, *Storie dell'Italia*, pp. 41-65.

<sup>5</sup> About the impact of the Revolution on everyday life, see: Jourdan, *La Révolution*, une exception, pp. 143-211. About the Italian framework, Michael Broers, however, expresses another position: Broers, *The Napoleonic Empire*, pp. 25-39.

<sup>6</sup> On this aspect, Livio Antonielli expresses a different judgment, emphasizing the administrative continuity with the previous militias: Antonielli, 'La polizia nello stato di Milano', pp. 131-133.

<sup>7</sup> About urban militias: *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119. Antonielli, 'Les réformes de la police', pp. 159-181. There are

law and order in the spring of 1796 fell to ‘all male citizens and their sons capable of bearing arms.’ The exercise of ‘the rights of citizen’ consisted in an actual and ongoing contribution to the implementation of the Republican order under development.<sup>8</sup> This major break, was marked by the emergence of a new kind of armed force capable of overriding the traditional recruiting practices of the forces of public order. The implications it brought forth were the affirmation of a new pact – between the citizens and the authorities – which guaranteed the individual’s rights and freedoms that then ensued from the collective and shared reappropriation of power in the name of law. From that moment on, the power was placed in the hands of the citizens to which it would serve collectively.<sup>9</sup> Although, the rearrangement of the sovereign power and the actual exercise of sovereignty could not be separated, and it was accompanied by the establishment of an unparalleled republican isonomy. This new kind of relationship was built upon a collective participation to the State affairs, which became the only guarantee against any risks of dissension or any kind of outbreak of tyranny, thanks to the perfect superposition, in the same figure, of the National Guard of the one who held the authority and of the administered who underwent it, though determining it.

Taking this into consideration, studying the organisational processes of the National Guard in Sister republics, its social composition and its operational practices, we note that their actions were an opportunity to focus on the innovations led by the Revolution in terms of the policing of the social and juridical order. On the other hand, this also represented a reason to question the construction of the new political order, its installation in a context of repressing different ways of dissidence and criminality, to which the political order had to face in a climate of mutations of the political principles that founded its legitimacy. The issue is not only to understand the ways that the land was monitored, but also to include these procedures into the process of state-building that they belonged to. The aim was to reflect upon this form of popular participation, not only through the birth of republican institutions but also through their consolidation, during the period of the ‘la transition délicate entre le temps guerrier de l’intrusion [...] et le temps policier de l’administration.’<sup>10</sup> This period appeared to be complex not just because of the criminal phenomena it occurred at a time with a tough political backdrop. In effect, the pacification and the normalisation of the social branch took place in a context of ‘pre legitimacy’ of

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other useful considerations, though questionable, in Broers, *The Napoleonic Empire*, p. 33. Moreover, the numerous works written or promoted by Livio Antonielli constitute an unavoidable reference on the subject. If the site of the Centro Interuniversitario di Studi ‘the Polizie e il Controllo del Territorio’ presents a complete bibliography on the subject: <https://www.cepoc.it/materiali/bibliografia-nota/bibliografia-autori>, consulted on 23 September 2018. I quote here only the work consulted to write this article.

<sup>8</sup> Art. 277 and art. 279 of the Cisalpine Constitution (URL: <http://www.dircost.unito.it/cs/docs/cisalpina1797.htm>, consulted on 9 October 2018). See also: Antonielli, ‘Tra Polizia e militare’, pp. 57-64.

<sup>9</sup> About the history of the National Guard in France, and especially during the Revolution of 1789, see: Dupuy, *La Garde Nationale*, and Gainot, ‘La “guerre de police”’, pp. 81-82.

<sup>10</sup> Houte, Luc, ‘Introduction’, p. 11.

the incipient state,<sup>11</sup> which had to turn the action of law enforcement into a means of elaboration of a consensus used for its own advantage.

Those two imperatives, political on one hand and of a policing nature on the other hand, they justified the creation of the national Cisalpine Guard's mobile columns, on 27 Thermidor Year V (14 August 1797). They should represent a strength able "to break down the pernicious occurrences of aggressions, extorsions, and arsons that afflict the rural areas" which were of close proximity to the city of Milan, having been elevated to the rank of capital of the new Republic.<sup>12</sup> According to the Cisalpine ministry of Police Gaetano Porro, who organizes the columns,<sup>13</sup> the threat was so serious that maintaining this climate of unrest would threaten the states survival as well as the supply of the armed forces. Indeed, these gangs of 'robbers, who are trained by deserters or any other unpunished and vicious subjects, jeopardise the peaceful farmers, plundering them and those of our Republic'.<sup>14</sup> Would the ministry inflate the situation? This question is difficult to answer, and this does not really matter basically. His posture showed less the real weakness of the republican institutions than it expressed their elitist fears. The word "robber" had several meanings in the revolutionarian language. It described as much a criminal reality as any kind of real or purely imaginary resistance to the process of State building.<sup>15</sup> The denouncing of the danger those 'robbers' represented, shows that the eradication of crime should be reinforced by a work of republicanisation of rural areas, through the conquest of geographical locations, the representation of which remained quartered between the timeless myth of the good peasant and the counter-revolutionary memory.

## II. THE CREATION OF THE MOBILE COLUMNS

It was the wish of Bonaparte who at this time was the Commander in Chief of the Army of Italy, to create the mobile columns. This move represented the culmination of the National Guard's organisation which started right after Milan was occupied in May 1796, and continued in the cities of the Republic until months later.<sup>16</sup> The aim of organising the mobile columns was a logical political move, it was recognised that villages or other little rural town remained territories which were sometimes unknown, sometimes not well controlled by the State.<sup>17</sup> It was thus more than essential to settle there the Republican au-

<sup>11</sup> About the concept of 'pre legitimacy': Ferrero, Pouvoir.

<sup>12</sup> Archivi di Stato di Milano (thereafter ASM), Militare, parte antica, 147.

<sup>13</sup> About Gaetano Porro, see: De Francesco, Gaetano Lodovico Baldassarre Porro Schiaffinati, online (URL: [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/porro-schiaffinati-gaetano-lodovico-baldassarre\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/porro-schiaffinati-gaetano-lodovico-baldassarre_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) consulted 9 October 2018).

<sup>14</sup> ASM, Militare, parte antica, 147.

<sup>15</sup> About the relationship between brigandage and desertion, see: Forrest, 'Déserteurs et brigands', but also: Rousseaux, 'Rebelles ou brigands?', pp. 101-132.

<sup>16</sup> On the organization of the sedentary National Guard of Milan: Antonielli, 'Tra Polizia e militare', pp. 65-73.

<sup>17</sup> From this point of view, continuity with the old regime is important, especially since the collapse of absolutism causes that of forms of rural militia reactivated during the 1770s. For the first aspect: Capra, Ci-

thority through “active and effective means” able to ‘remedy the slowness of the standard methods’.<sup>18</sup>

This fact justifies the operational structure of the mobile columns followed a different pattern to those formerly created by the directorial France, in Floréal year IV, whose design had inspired Bonaparte.<sup>19</sup> In both cases, the sedentary National Guard of the large cities constituted a hiring pool entirely made of men who volunteered to join the mobile troops.<sup>20</sup> In France like in Lombardia, the mobile columns’ action and discipline were ruled by the National Guard’s status stationed in the cities.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, it would be complex to find other common points between these two experiments. On one hand, Bonaparte insisted on the militarisation of the Cisalpine group, conceding more power to the officers who were directly chosen by political authorities instead of being elected by the troops. On the other hand, the commander in chief ensured the new organisations their complete operational autonomy, which left them appearing like independent forces under the direct control of the supreme authority of the Republic, in other words, the Cisalpine Directory. This made it possible to firstly use, and then scatter them once these exceptional circumstances, that justified their creation, have ceased.<sup>22</sup>

These decisions deeply changed the mobile forces framework, compared to the French situation, because they weakened the link between local administrations and this type of organisations. The latter were formerly conceived as an extraordinary and punctual appeal aimed at restoring public order disrupted by local elements.<sup>23</sup> The decree of 27 Thermidor entailed provisions in which left a voluntary power strongly militarised and politi-

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serani, ‘Criminalità e repressione’, pp. 1-25. On the same subject: Solavaggione, ‘Brigantaggio e contrabbando’, vol. 54, I, pp. 23-49 and II, pp. 375-419. More recently: Antonielli, ‘Il controllo delle campagne lombarde’, pp. 1-19.

<sup>18</sup> ASM, Militare, parte antica, 147. The creation of the columns is preceded by the approval of the provisional laws against ‘thieves and criminals’, which established the criminal court and the law against ‘the enemies of public order’ (Raccolta delle leggi, III, pp. 99-101). The existence of a legal framework makes the mobile columns profoundly different from the revolutionary armies studied by Richard Cobb, who were ‘above all groups of armed civilians, [...] they do not militarize, and civil armies have all the weaknesses’ (Cobb, *Les armées Révolutionnaires*, vol. 1, p. 1).

<sup>19</sup> The use of mobile columns, composed by soldiers, was not unknown in Lombardy during the 18th century. See: Capra, Ciserani, ‘Criminalità e repressione’, pp. 20-22. For France, see: ‘Arrêté du Directoire exécutif portant établissement [sic] de Colonnes mobiles dans la Garde nationale sédentaire’ of 17 Floréal an IV (6 May 1796): Collection générale des lois, II, p. 118.

<sup>20</sup> Art. 2 and art. 3 of the law on mobile columns promulgated by General Bonaparte on 27 Thermidor year V (1 August 1797) (AMS, Militare, parte antica, 147). The commander of the mobile columns is chosen directly by the executive power on 11 Thermidor is the adjutant general of the Milan National Guard Giovanni Battista Bertoglio. The officers responsible for three columns are named on 29 Thermidor Year V (3 August 1797) in the people of Cornelio Garbagnati, surgeon at the city hospital, Giuseppe Strazza, merchant, and Francesco Zucconi, unknown profession (Ibid.).

<sup>21</sup> See also the regulation drawn up by the commander Bertoglio (Ibid.).

<sup>22</sup> Art. 10 of the law on mobile columns. While the political responsibility for the use of mobile columns fell on the Directory, their armament and equipment were the responsibility of the Minister of War, their use in the field decided by the Minister of Police. These provisions are specified by the directive of the Directory of 18 Thermidor Year V (5 August 1797) (Ibid.).

<sup>23</sup> About the use of mobile columns in France, see: Clay, ‘La Garde Nationale en Provence’, pp. 359-370. Sotocasa, *Les Brigands et la Révolution*, pp. 335-339.

cised, which rule was to intervene on a 'national' scale, in order to pacify the rural areas, a 'guerre de police',<sup>24</sup> was being fought against organised crime, it was orchestrated and led by the highest instances of the State against large scale banditry.

Each of them being composed of around fifty volunteers, which were under the command of a captain,<sup>25</sup> the three mobile columns were able to deploy and support heavy firepower allowing coverage of a wide geographical area. Their actions were decided thanks to the pieces of information received downstream, by the executive power (or even, when appropriate, by local populations) while Commissioners of Justice were sent to the operating sites to make a selection of the captives, deciding whether they were offered immediate release or referral to the Milan criminal Courts.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the mobile columns represented a 'provisional' and 'imposed by the circumstances',<sup>27</sup> institution while still being strong power, this was evidenced by its means and support: Each officer had his own funds and, in the event of a dispute, the commander could address the highest instances of the Republic in order to impose his own standpoint. It could also be regarded that the volunteers enrolment and weaponry were settled at the expense of other armed corps, who reported demise of thousands of rifles but also the sudden departure of tens of national guards?<sup>28</sup>

Confronted by this urgent situation, the actions of the first patrol of the cities southern boundaries came before the official constitution of this organisation.<sup>29</sup> In the meantime, in Milan, at the troop's barracks, officers began the process of quickly recruiting volunteers who were chosen among the members of the central companies and the chasseurs.<sup>30</sup> Among those citizens-soldiers of urban origin, 98% of them were born inside the city or in its urban fringe.<sup>31</sup> Most of them belonged to the urban working class and were affected by the economic downturn of the city.

<sup>24</sup> Gainot, 'La "guerre de police"' pp. 81-82.

<sup>25</sup> Each column is composed of forty-eight volunteers, five non-commissioned officers, two lieutenants and a captain (ASM, Militare, parte antica, 147).

<sup>26</sup> Art. XII and XIII of the law on mobile columns. These commissioners of justice had under their command men on horseback who were to ensure the transfer of prisoners in the city (Ibid.).

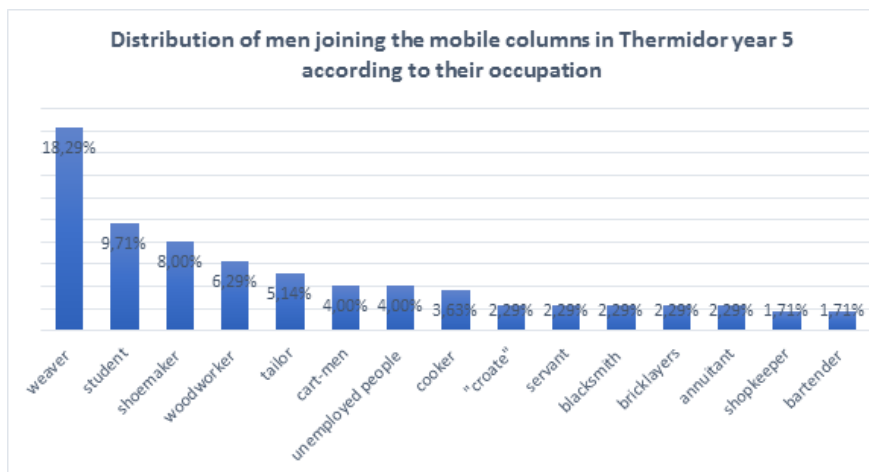
<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> For the organization of the Milanese National Guard: Raccolta delle leggi, III, 3, pp. 22-23.

<sup>29</sup> The first report concerns the operations carried out by two provisional columns of forty-five volunteers between the 11 and 14 Thermidor year V (29 July-1 August 1797). A second action, this time done by a hundred men, is launched between the 18 and on the 26 Thermidor year V (13 August 1797) (ASM, Militare, parte antica, 147).

<sup>30</sup> Recruitment operations are completed on 29 Thermidor Year V (16 August 1797), but the columns will take up position in their bases the first days of Fructidor (Ibid.).

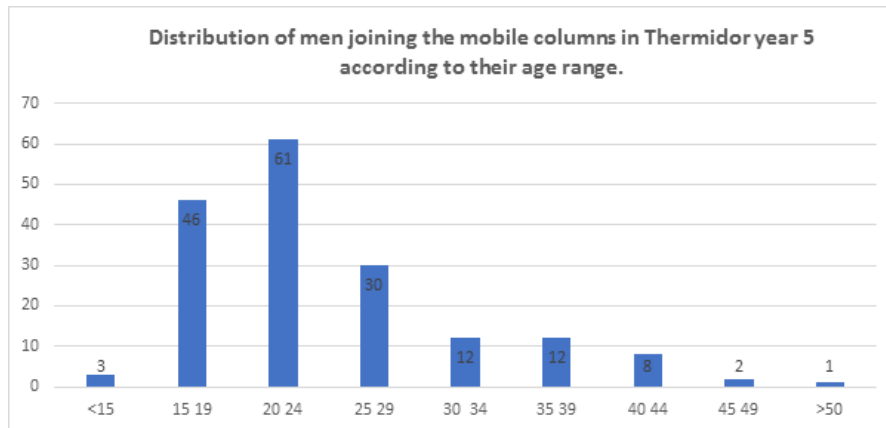
<sup>31</sup> Punctual recruitments are made at the sites of operation. In total there are a dozen men, half of whom are foreigners (Ibid., 147-149). See the following note.



Weavers represented one fifth of the total of volunteers (18.3%), followed by other artisans or other manual workers such as shoemakers (8%), woodworkers (6.3%), tailors (5.1%) or cart-men (4%). Beyond the differences of work, those low-income professionals found in the regularity of their new salary a means to move beyond this casualisation, imposed by the economic conditions. It was to be found particularly true of the younger workforce. 61.7% of them did not reach the age 25 years old, which indirectly means that they might be workers rather than masters, leading them to be entrenched in the working-class structures. Students made up (9.7%) and annuitants (2.3% of the total)<sup>33</sup>, who almost always held positions of responsibility, such as deputy officers or officers, which also shows that this assumption of responsibility attracted lower classes and was equally a kind of self-promotion within the republican society. Enrolling in the army demonstrated that the social and economical factors were in line with a real ideological re-involvement of the National Guard.

<sup>32</sup> Here and elsewhere, I have only elaborated data concerning men engaged in Thermidor Year V, the only ones concerning age and occupation. No information is available on the other hand about their civil status. Then, out of the total of 175 cases identified, I took into account only the most significant categories, those that exceeded 1% of the total (ASM, *Militare, parte antica*, 147). Among these, we note that 'croate' associated with names, however, typically Milanese. No profession was so designated in the eighteenth century, with all probability they are deserters of Slavic regiments in the service of the Republic of Venice, whose names were Italianized. Other foreigners (at least one Romanian, two French, two Spaniards and one Piedmontese) are enlisted during the winter to fill the voids left by desertions (*Ibid.*, 149).

<sup>33</sup> The important presence of students is also explained by the closing of educational institutions, promoted by the Cisalpine Republic, for their reform. See: Brambilla, *Università e professioni*, pp. 467-481).



It is telling in that respect that enrolling in the mobile columns was not seen as an extension or the beginning of a military career. Of those who had decided to join the troops, less than 5% of men were formerly in the military and around 9.7% were armed force when it dissolved in Ventôse year VI, or February 1798.<sup>34</sup> Enlisting in the mobiles columns was always considered as an interlude before coming back to the civilian life, in one's home town. These elements explain the high rate of desertions that affected mobile columns throughout the fall, when 22.2% of men decided to leave the troops with no authorisation.<sup>35</sup> Defections increased when there was a delay in payment, the enforcement operations took too long and moving away from Milan towards the Republic boundaries. From the volunteers' view point, these elements changed the temporary nature of their situation and showed them the economic benefits they thought they could obtain would be lower.<sup>36</sup> Henceforth, the fact to desert became the evidence that would quickly drive a wedge between male field workers and the political power's expectations. This power would likely turn citizens-soldiers into an ongoing repressive professional force.

### III. REPRESSIVE USES AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH RURAL AREAS POPULATIONS

The mobiles columns' first actions could be compared to simple raids, at the end of Thermidor, when the three troops were settled in their headquarters situated twenty kilometres away from the city,<sup>37</sup> their actions were repeated and more intense, following a pre-

<sup>34</sup> Only 17 men, including the officers, will engage the 3 Ventose Year VI (21 February 1798), in the troops of line, including six officers (ASM, Militare, parte antica, 149).

<sup>35</sup> In total, 39 men out of 175 deserts (Ibid., 147 and 149, passim.)

<sup>36</sup> In their reports, the officers emphasize that their men 'have other incomes to feed their families than their national salary' and that the regularity of payments is a major stake to guarantee the cohesion of the ranks. Ibid, 147. Despite the efforts of Minister Porro, the Executive Board is never in a position to ensure a regular transfer of funds (Ibid., 149).

<sup>37</sup> The columns are placed at Melzo to protect the link with Bergamo, at Marignano to clean the roads to

cise *modus operandi* in accordance with the commander in chief of the *Armée d'Italie* instructions. Managed in an autonomous way by a captain who was constantly in contact with Milan headquarters, the columns intervened on the field by little groups that crisscrossed along sides of the roads leading towards the capital. Because collective actions demanded the participation of several tens of men were quite exceptional, the tactical deployment of troops quickly evolved into a routine that lasted for nine weeks without appreciable variation of time. These small troops were particularly active during evening and night-time hours, and would gather together by sunrise, when the National Guards would take up their positions in surrounding villages.

Even though their actions mainly took place away from densely populated areas, in the form of rummages of isolated farms, dwellings, or cabarets, where most of arrests occurred, the little town represented not only a key place in the implementation of the political mission of the mobile columns, but also in the groundwork for future activities. During their stay in the boroughs, the National Guards would demonstrate the presence of the State on the local population and re-establish confidence pact between constituents and the Republic. This is done through public ceremonies such as volunteers' parade or plantings of trees of freedom on the main place of the village.<sup>38</sup> Most of the time, the relationship was limited to public discourses between officers on one hand, and local authorities and citizens on the other hand. The latter seized the opportunity to denounce suspicious person or activities, which could facilitate the action of maintenance of law and order.<sup>39</sup> On another note, even though the requisitioning of local guides became a usual procedure, it was more exceptional to see populations directly participating to the operations, despite the National Guards urging. As mentioned in one of the first reports sent to the Ministry of Police,<sup>40</sup> fears of reprisals 'against people or dwellings' were too strong. When the villagers took up arms to help the troops, they did refuse to go near the prisoners, with concerns they would be identified.<sup>41</sup>

This peasants' mistrust was linked to the awareness of the weakness of the repressive machinery, supposed to ensure order but it has also to do with a feeling of distrust towards the National Guards. This feeling could scarcely be seen through an active resistance against the troop's arrivals, (gunshots or sound of tocsin), nonetheless this hostility remained dormant, which exacerbated the troops and their officers' feelings of

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Bologna and Abbiategrosso to cover the way to the Alps and Turin (Ibid., 147). These are the places traditionally affected by strong rural crime. For the 18th century, see: Capra, Ciserani, 'Criminalità e repressione', pp. 3-5.

<sup>38</sup> ASM, Militare, parte antica, 147.

<sup>39</sup> See for example the operations of 18 Thermidor Year V (5 August 1797), when the communes provide 'guides, explorers and village men in number of 58' to facilitate the operations of the columns (Ibid.). To 'facilitate' relations with the civilian population and encourage them to collaborate, the captains have the sums which they distribute at will from 7 Fructidor year V (22 August 1797) (Ibid.).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> For example, in the vicinity of Pavia, the column manages to seize a man named Giardinetto, 'a man of very bad reputation, brigand, murderer, arsonist, thief and deserter: [...] It must be observed that while the volunteers showed the greatest courage, the men of the village did not even dare to approach the robber and handcuff him while he was disarmed and he invited them [to do so]' (Ibid.).



insecurity. This ‘scorn towards Republicans’ felt by the guards partly explained their violence, in particular in the limits of the *département* of Olona, when volunteers intervened in Republic of Venice’s former lands, lately operated under the authority of the Cisalpine Republic.<sup>42</sup> In ‘this really dangerous country’, a land totally unknown by those men coming from the cities and who even did not share the same dialects as local populations, the National Guards operations were tarnished by a large amount of exactions that occurred nowhere else, like robbery, damage, threats to the civil population. In Cassano d’Adda, deputy officers, as a direct result of not being housed, pointed an arm at the mayor of the city, who was unable to satisfy their demands. In the *département* of Serio (Bergame), the first and only mission ended by a general fight between mobile columns and local National Guards.<sup>43</sup>

At the same period of time, several farms in the surroundings complained about arbitrary requisitions and irruptions into private spaces for no apparent reason.<sup>44</sup> Lessened into ‘jokes’ by the main officers, these actions infuriated local authorities which did not wait to denounce to the central power, the indignity ‘of Our republic’. As it was pointed out by the community of Crema, on Vendémiaire year V, ‘there is no more efficient means to disgust the People than these exactions, and the contempt of some of the agents. All the energies should be involved, Citizens, to avoid to leave these crimes unpunished and in order to avoid any disturbances, that could constantly occur.’<sup>45</sup> The warning, which was an implicit threat of a peasant revolt against armed forces, revealed the state of weakness and of tiredness of the villages communities after two years of war. On the one hand, it illustrated the appropriation of the republican message, the expectations of the change it generated in the little town. Besides, this also showed the deception induced by the mobile columns’ unethical actions, the repetition of which put into question the citizens’ confidence.<sup>46</sup>

If these misdemeanours blemished the political message, that the mobile columns illustrated, was their repressive action efficient? Reports sent to the Ministry of Police seemed to show evidence of a quick improvement of the situation. On 14 Fructidor Year VI (31 August 1797), Commissioner for Justice, seconded to the column of Abbiategrasso, indicated that ‘the national guards are efficient and less robberies and muggings are reported, compared to the past.’<sup>47</sup> Far from being isolated, this assessment of the situation

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> See the report of 8 Fructidor Year V (25 August 1797) (Ibid.).

<sup>44</sup> On 19 Fructidor year V (5 September 1797), the Column Commander at Melzo was forced to dismiss national guards because of their indiscipline and thefts committed against the local population (Ibid.). In total, nine National Guards will be expelled from the ranks for unworthy behaviour (Ibid., 147-149, *passim*).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>46</sup> Mobile columns replicate the same behaviours of those that had been deployed in previous decades. See: Capra, Ciserani, ‘Criminalità e repressione’, pp. 20-21. It should be pointed out, however, that the passage of mobile columns sometimes encourages emulation, as in Gallarate where volunteers propose to the Directory to form a fourth column on 6 Fructidor year V (23 August 1797). The proposal has no follow-up (ASM, Militare, part antica, 147).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

was confirmed by the pieces of information collected by other groups. On second complementary day year V (18 September 1797), the commanding of the columns Bertoglio could finally propose a redeployment of his troops, since ‘the inside stillness authorises the use of columns to prevent illegal transport of wheat’, which took place on the Republic southern boundaries.<sup>48</sup> Even if, in reality, the actions to pacify the rural areas lasted a few weeks, and a column went on crisscrossing across the countryside and ensuring safety in the villages around Pavia, while others were sent elsewhere to counter smuggling operations,<sup>49</sup> this evolution of the mobile columns’ actions encourages to investigate on the real aims of the maintenance of law and order in the mobile columns.



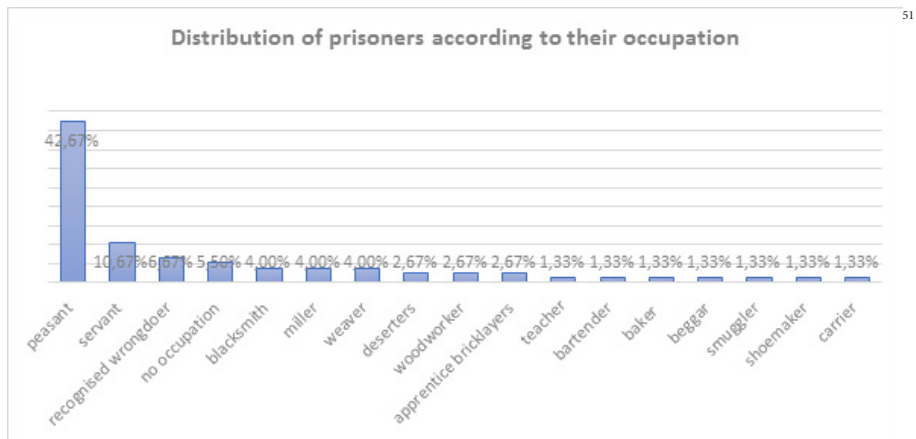
In green, the mobile columns’ position in the fight against banditry (Thermidor year V, Vendémiaire year VI). In red, position adopted to struggle against the illegal trade of wheat. (Vendémiaire Brumaire, year VI).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. These places were the hub of contraband since the beginning of the century (Solavagione, ‘Brigantaggio e contrabbando’, II, p. 375).

<sup>49</sup> ASM, Militare, part antica, 148.

#### IV. FROM TRACKING DOWN ROBBERY TO THE REPRESSION OF MARGINALS

The mobile columns could both efficiently and rapidly struggle against robbery because there was nobody to arrest since they met no opposition along their patrols in the Lombardy plains, without any other form of resistance both collective or organised. Ample evidence of this was the arrestation forms, which were often inchoate, and the reports of operations sent to the mobile columns' headquarters. These documents permitted to recount, with near precise detail, the actions led on the field by volunteers as well as the profiles of the 131 arrested citizens. Within nine weeks, (from 11 Thermidor Year VI to 21 Vendémiaire Year VI, or from 29 July to 11 October 1797), the mobile columns proceeded to solely two collective arrests of groups of more than ten people.<sup>50</sup>



Most of the time, patrols arrested individuals or small groups of up to four people, composed by young men (26 years old on average) and 42.7% of them were ordinary peasants or at times servants (10.7%) who were unable to justify their presence on site.<sup>52</sup> It was quite rare to see professional criminals such as smugglers or wanted thieves, in which arrests were recognised as a real success by the Ministry of Police. Even though the informers of the Ministry of Police continued to allude the existence of criminal organisations hidden in the woods,<sup>53</sup> the authorities pursued these claims to no avail with only tracks left behind which led to the arrests of marginal or petty criminals. Their exi-

<sup>50</sup> One of the two is due to a brawl broke out at the time of the arrival of the troops. Figures obtained from the compilation of data in *Ibid.*, 147 and 148.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, the report drawn up on the 1 Fructidor Year V (18 August 1797), but especially that of the 5 Fructidor year V (22 August 1797), addressed to the Directory, which is very detailed. It mentions four gangs of criminals who operate at the eastern margins of the department of Olona. Even if the column of Melzo will be directed in these places in the hunt for a band of thirty 'robbers' around Caravaggio, she cannot find them. 15 Fructidor Year V (1 September 1797) (*Ibid.*, 147).

stence could be explained by the absence of any State control and by the existence of several deserters in Lombardy.<sup>54</sup> The course of justice was led against characters on the fringe of peasant society, who were not totally excluded of it. Even though they were seen as dangerous or suspicious by local communities, they remained tolerated. With the fear of reprisals, the local population were left with a presence which was both infrequent and yet at time permanent, right up to the moment when the mobile columns arrival became the opportunity to get rid of them. For instance, a miller and his son were denounced by villagers because of their 'bad reputation'. They were found in their bed with:

The son: a Croatian rifle, a loaded shotgun, a knife with a bone handle in a damaged sheath, a satchel for powder, small calibre ammunitions, two rifle bullets, sixty Piedmont pounds of high-denomination banknotes, three ecus of France, one Spanish gold coin, one Milanese ecu, a finely engraved time piece etched with the face of the Roy de Paris, three policemen's handcuffs.

The father: an old shotgun, a short rifle, a knife, ammunitions of all calibres.<sup>55</sup>

As seen in this example, more than one third (35.3%) of the arrests led by the National Guard could be justified by suspected thefts, concealment of property, both of them being demonstrated by search operations on site, or, most of the time, justified by mere declarations from the neighbours. Certainly, the ongoing increase of requests for cartridges showed that the National Guard had to confront real resistance.<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, it must be recognised that the crimes of the accused remained 'des méfaits plutôt ordinaires, commis dans des circonstances banales. Il s'agit moins de meurtres [non-existent in the cisalpine case] ou de vols de grand chemin que de petits larcins, chapardages ou de maraudages'.<sup>57</sup> These actions are the direct result of poverty, which was only exacerbated by the war, which perfectly ensured the continuity of the 18th century with traditional criminal activities. Written in November 1791 by the city of Pavia, these lines could not be called into question six years later:

The real *balossi* [wrongdoers, in the dialect of Lombardy] are the slackers and the tramps coming from the national rural areas as well as from foreign countries and the latest are the most dangerous. They lived thanks to the resources they could procure daily, either innocently, or by the fear they provoked on peasants, threatening them to set fire isolated farms. They moved around constantly from shelter to shelter, and they rarely accepted any form of temporary employ.<sup>58</sup>

Inspecting the roads and controlling those who proceeded them is in fact a crucial issue for the mobile columns. They multiplied the number of arrests for deserters and fo-

<sup>54</sup> Several reports highlight the effects of the presence of 'deserters from all armies and other individuals brought by them who submerge the Republic' (Ibid.).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Par exemple, le 1 fructidor an V (18 août 1797), les colonnes reçoivent 1620 cartouches, dix par volontaire, qui sont épuisées le 17 vendémiaire an VI (8 octobre 1797) (Ibid.).

<sup>57</sup> Forrest, 'Déserteurs et brigands sous la Révolution et l'Empire: état de la question', p. 101.

<sup>58</sup> Passage quoted by Capra, Ciserani, 'Criminalità e repressione', p. 9. About the crimes committed: Ibid., p. 11.

reigners (18% of the cases), of citizens without safety card (10%) or in possession of firearms without permission (9%). They would either be expelled from the Republic in one case, or sent back home in the other case, all the citizens were immediately released by the seconded Commissioners of Justice. Only 62.3% of the prisoners arrested by the National Guards were presented to the criminal Court of Milan, including the men accused of vagrancy and idleness. It is allowed to wonder how many of them were really condemned. This is impossible to quantify precisely, nevertheless, the first trials, held in Thermidor, led to a fight between the judges and the Ministry of Police Gaetano Porro. The minister demanded his magistrates to ‘use evidence to show the guilt of common enemies of the Republic in order to inflict them a doctrinal punishment in public’, the judges replied that, most of the times, the accused are mere citizens ‘who are neither idle nor wrongdoers, but only men who devote their time to a peaceful work and who have no equivocal conduct’ pleading for their acquittal.<sup>59</sup> Formulated at the beginning of the mobile columns activity, those considerations would not be able to sum up the aporia of this experiment of popular and revolutionary law enforcement. They revealed all the same tensions that characterised the period and explained, in fine, the dissolution of those organisations, on Ventôse year VI, (February 1798).

## V. CONCLUSION

Certainly, one can recognise that the mobile columns had failures and setbacks from Vendémiaire Year V (October 1797), which forced the Cisalpine authorities to make quick decisions. Upon ceasing operations against wanted felons, who remained untraceable, the mobile columns were deployed along the boundaries. Firstly, on the west, close to Tessin to tackle illegal trade of grain, then on the east side, in the Bergamasque mountains, in order to fend off the incursion from the Trentin area. In both cases, they were unable to effectively cope against heavily armed groups. During the first theatre of operations, well organized gangs, supported by local populations,<sup>60</sup> passed through or succeeded in avoided detection at the National Guard’s roadblocks. Weeks later, because they were weakened by desertions and had settled in a hostile environment, volunteers renounced to persecute actively foreign smugglers who would cross the frontier, before snow could obstruct mountain passes.<sup>61</sup> This inactivity is interrupted by the ‘battle of 9 Nivôse’ year VI, which ended without casualties nor injuries. It was the last stand for the mobile columns.<sup>62</sup>

Overwrought by the relationships with local communities, upset by the inefficiency of the volunteers, the Cisalpine Directoire decided to call them back to the capital and to

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<sup>59</sup> See exchange of 17 and 19 Thermidor (ASM, Militare, parte antica, 147). The same considerations are repeated on the 19 Fructidor, Year V (5 September 1797) (Ibid.).

<sup>60</sup> According to the reports sent to the Directory, people were shooting on the mobile columns in order to make the smuggler’s escape as safe as they could (Ibid., 148).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

dissolve mobile columns, refusing to grant them with any military honours.<sup>63</sup> The proposition of a prolongation of their involvement in the troops ended on a total breakdown: 95% of them and two thirds of the officers left the army as early as the last dissolution of the troops on 3 Ventôse.<sup>64</sup> On both sides, these behaviours were the evidence of the mixed review of this police experiment. The last events, in particular the operation in the Alps, were the opportunity to highlight the limits, showing it was impossible to militarise the mobile columns, to turn them into a professional force able to deal with, to restrain or to eradicate those kinds of criminality or organised resistance, despite the expectations which had justified its creation.

Nonetheless, if one only takes these circumstances into account it would mean to forgo an analysis on the real significance of this experiment, but also of the troubles it raised in terms of popular participation to the enforcement of law and order, at a period of political changes, and that – as early as Vendémiaire and thus as early as the first operation around the capital – had already motivated the idea of a premature dissolution of those organisations.<sup>65</sup> Once the first period of crisis, a moment of emptiness, during the creation of the Sister republic was over, the State authority enforced slowly and gradually relegated popular participation. On one hand, forcing the creation of the départements allowed to build a viable institutional framework, which was strong and lasting, able to monitor the control of the territory, on a local scale, without the intervention of extraordinary forces. On the other hand, the implementation of the Directorial institutions, which represented a source of inspiration for the Cisalpine republic, was done through their self-empowerment towards its authorised representative, through the distinction between the exercise of citizenship and bearing of arms, which characterised the beginning of the republican experiment.

Thereupon, the dissolution of the mobile columns as a body could be considered as a way to bring in line with the repressive police actions, and generally, the forms of popular participation in this directory policy framework.<sup>66</sup> This marked the end of an era of exceptions, of pacification and the beginning of a stable administrative system, in which the implementation of republican isonomy was translated and imposed through the sacred status of the institutions, which was called into question by the existence of mobile columns. That is all the more true that their action had been characterised by the persistence of previous policing practices that the new republican regime wanted to go beyond. Bonaparte, who glorified, on Prairial year V (May 1797), the invincibility of a ‘whole people [when it] is armed and wants to defend its freedom,’ when he left, on 21 Brumaire Year VI (11 November 1797), merely entrusting the Cisalpine freedom to the lawmakers, the army and the Grande Nation. The lack of direct references to the people and to the National Guards was less an omission than an announcement of a new de-

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<sup>63</sup> No doubt the resignations of the radical and influential Minister of Police Porro, in Brumaire year VI (October-November 1797), weakens the institution of mobile columns (*Ibid.*, 148).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>66</sup> On the decline of the National Guard in France, see: Dupuy, *La garde nationale*, p. 286.

mocratic phase that the Sister republic was about to experience. In other words, as well as their creation, the mobile columns' fate was tightly linked to political reasoning. With the change from the revolutionary state to the constitutional state, the republicanisation of the north side of the peninsula moved into an unprecedented phase that demanded a new organisation of police forces.

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