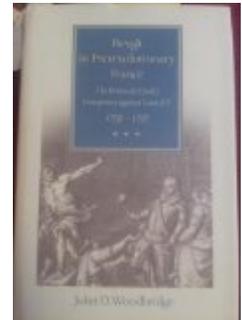


John D. Woodbridge. *Revolt in Pre-Revolutionary France: The Prince de Conti's Conspiracy against Louis XV, 1755-1757.* Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. xvii + 242 pp. \$39.95 US, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-4945-9.



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The middle of the eighteenth century was a tumultuous time for France. It was perhaps the most brilliant period of Louis XV's reign, yet fraught with great problems. Enlightenment thought, marked by Denis Diderot's volume-by-volume publication of the *Encyclopedie*, challenged aspects of the traditional political and economic order. Jansenism, which opposed Jesuit theories of free will with a strict Augustinian emphasis on the necessary role of divine grace for human salvation, had been banned several times since 1653. The movement had regained strength through the *parti janseniste* in the Parlement de Paris and seemed to threaten the religious and political stability of the state.

Jansenism, like Protestantism, was not only a religious stance, but also a political one: to admit Jansenism as orthodoxy meant a negation of the premise that the Roman Catholic religion was the only one in France, an important legal fiction upheld by the monarchy. Structural imbalances in the French economy were deepening, thanks to an antiquated system of taxation and the widening gulf between the expectations of the growing

merchant and commercial class and the resistance of the nobility to the encroaching bourgeoisie. Political and economic reforms were proving impossible; and intermittent warfare with England went on from the 1740s to the end of Louis' life (d. 1774).

Yet for all of the looming trouble, court life reached new levels of refinement during the period of royal mistress Madame de Pompadour's enormous personal and political influence (1743-1757). Underneath the glitter of courtly spectacle, however, bitter rivalries formed in opposition to the *maitresse-en-titre's* hold over the king. One of the leaders of the anti-Pompadour faction was the king's cousin, the powerful and popular Prince de Conti. Conti, a military hero, a supporter of the Jansenists in the Parlement de Paris, and a trusted advisor, suddenly fell from royal favor in 1756 and 1757, later to be publicly, but not privately, reinstated into the king's good graces. What had happened?

In *Revolt in Pre-Revolutionary France*, John D. Woodbridge, a professor of history at the Trinity Evangelical School and a visiting professor at

Northwestern University, claims that religious disputes were the backdrop to a serious political threat to Louis XV, which occurred between 1755 and 1757, when the Prince de Conti conspired to force the king from his throne in what Woodbridge characterizes as an "eighteenth-century Fronde" (p. 136). Further, this seditious activity impeded the ability of the monarchy to preserve its sacred authority, later subverting, for instance, Louis XVI's attempts to reinforce the sacred bond of king and nation during his coronation at Rheims in 1775. "Too much of the monarchy's sacred aura had been obliterated during the politico-religious revolt against Louis XV; too many 'enlightened' and 'frondish' views of the state now contested this sacred ideology in both clandestine and licit literature" (p. 171). This argument is consistent with Dale Van Kley's work (see, for example his *The Damiens Affair and the Unravelling of the Ancien Regime, 1750-1770* [1984]). Van Kley points to a change in the king's sacramental policy, which played a part in the unbinding of state and king.

Woodbridge also acknowledges a debt to Jeffrey Merrick's research into the "desacralization" of the monarchy (*The Desacralization of the French Monarchy* [1990]), asserting that a similar loss of position occurred in the aftermath of the Conti conspiracy (p. 173). The author ties the political and religious controversies of the 1750s into a larger context of the eroding status of monarchy in France, which raises another question. If Conti's plot, attempting, as it did, to exploit religious and political discontents and to recreate a Fronde-like revolt, severely damaged the monarchy through desacralization, why was the original Fronde (1648-1652), certainly a more serious rebellion, unable to undermine permanently Louis XIV's absolutism? Further, if Conti's plot was successfully covered up by its protagonists, as Woodbridge claims, to what extent can it have served to destroy the sacred status of the monarchy in

France, helping to pave the way for the French Revolution?

Woodbridge's book is both thought-provoking and curious. The author adroitly uncovers a conspiratorial Prince de Conti, plotting in collusion with high Protestant clergy. He suggests that the conspiracy involved the British government, and implies that Conti may have been implicated in the assassination attempt on Louis XV by Robert-Francois Damiens in 1757.

In his attempt to uncover what would have been, even at the time, shadowy and secretive plots, Woodbridge has made ingenious use of reports from government spies and correspondence from the principal participants, and a wide variety of other primary sources. The difficulty in sifting through the labyrinth of deceit, innuendo, and coded information is that the sources ultimately remain elusive and ambiguous, full of tantalizing hints, which sometimes necessitate important leaps in interpretation. Occasionally, Woodbridge's conspiracy theory seems to take on a life of its own, reading too much into the sources. Woodbridge writes that, "[a]s the byzantine story of intrigue began to unfold, I came to realize that the conspiracy was far more complex and expansive than I had ever envisioned" (p. xiv). In fact, what appears to have been a well-planned conspiracy to Woodbridge may have been no more than Conti's improvised stratagems to oppose Madame de Pompadour's political positions. Conti was eager to offer himself as the leader of opposition to Pompadour, and he attempted to ally himself with her enemies, the Jansenists and the Parlement de Paris.

According to Woodbridge, the conspiracy may be summarized in three points: first, between 1755 and 1757 the Prince de Conti tried to use the issue of freedom of conscience for French Protestants to gain allies in an attempt to topple Louis XV from the French throne; second, William Pitt the Elder, the British secretary of state and the architect of the British victory in the Seven Years`

War, planned a British naval landing on the French west coast, in hopes of sparking a Huguenot rebellion or a mass emigration of Protestants from France. Finally, there was a further conspiracy aimed at a coverup of these plots, with the collusion of both Conti and the French king in an attempt to avoid embarrassment for either party. Louis XV could not afford to offend Conti's many followers, while the disloyal prince would only set back his attempt to regain favor at court by public revelations of his failed conspiracy.

The author's thesis rests on the proposition that the quest for Huguenot freedom of conscience left the Protestant minority far more inclined to disobedience and rebellion than is commonly supposed. Conti needed to find an armed group of willing conspirators with whom to raise the standard of insurrection, and he looked to the Protestants as potential allies. The Huguenots did pose a potential threat to the monarchy, for while the religious minority generally proclaimed loyalty to the king, many of them carried out officially forbidden acts, such as public worship ceremonies and the construction of new churches. The very existence of non-Catholics in France, of course, was technically a form of disobedience, since France gave no legal status to persons not baptized in the Catholic church. However, most Protestants tried to reconcile their obedience to God, as they saw it, with loyalty to the king.

Woodbridge convincingly shows that Conti tried to persuade the Protestants to play the role of co-conspirators: he appealed to the Protestant national synod and he asked for intelligence on Huguenot military strength. Conti appears to have miscalculated, however, for the overwhelming majority of Protestants appear to have opposed the rebellion, and in fact prided themselves on their loyalty to the crown. But Woodbridge points to the radicalism of some of the Protestant leaders, such as pastor Jean-Louis Gibert, to suggest that Huguenots, particularly in the south, were

discontented, because of government persecution, and ready to rise up against the king. Here Woodbridge holds to the position, argued so effectively by Philippe Joutard in *La Légende des Camisards: une sensibilité au passé* (1977), that protestations of obedience and devotion to the monarchy sometimes disguised the desire "to take up arms in imitation of their Camisard forebears" (p. xi). Huguenot leaders wanted official toleration from the crown and permission to worship publicly, but most found the prospect of open rebellion to be frightening and unlikely to succeed.

The weaknesses of the book are in two areas: first, Woodbridge asks the reader to accept a level of cooperation and collusion between the Protestant leadership, the British government, and Conti that the evidence does not fully support. The author does a creditable job of identifying the connections between Huguenot leaders and Conti, but is less successful in implicating Conti directly with British agents.

When he discusses the planning of Pitt's "Secret Expedition" to the French west coast, Woodbridge asserts that the British government believed that Conti had promised protection to Gibert and his radical Huguenot followers. It is not clear, however, whether Conti's bargain with the Protestants implied backing for a British-supported rebellion or was only a promise to protect the Huguenots from persecution. The British would certainly have but the author's evidence does fully sustain this scenario.

Second, the author asserts that Louis may have very nearly abdicated as a result of Conti's conspiracy and the abortive attempt on his life. In the aftermath of the assassination attempt, the secret correspondence of an unidentified spy alluded to a possible abdication, but Louis XV was often moody and depressed, and the spy may have reported no more than the king's frequent bouts of despondency.

The great strength of Woodbridge's work is its combination of meticulous research and provoca-

tive interpretation. The existence of at least substantial elements of Conti's plot seems indisputable. Woodbridge presents both direct and collateral evidence of Conti's discussions with pastor Paul Rabaut, in which the idea of a Conti-led Protestant revolt was raised. The split in the Huguenot ranks over Conti's plot is effectively discussed and well-documented. The difficulty with what Woodbridge calls the "moderate" position was that "... the caveat that Protestants submitted to the monarchy except when it forbade public worship permitted foes to impugn the sincerity of the Protestants' repeated professions of loyalty" (p. 20). Woodbridge nonetheless demonstrates the clear victory of the more numerous "moderate" Huguenots over their vocal, but outnumbered, radical co-religionists.

In conclusion, *Revolt in Pre-Revolutionary France* succeeds in uncovering the machinations of the troubled Prince de Conti's relationship with Louis XV and in describing the hopes and fears of the influential Huguenot leaders. If the book falls short of proving the existence of a pervasive conspiracy in which all of the principals were committed to a common goal, it does convincingly and lucidly place the tangled threads of Conti's conspiracy into a larger context of "desacralization" of the monarchy. Woodbridge declares that "[i]t provided a precedent of sorts and arguments for revolt for some of those who defied another king in the turbulent days preceding a much larger 'revolution' three decades later" (p. 183). This last statement sums up both the strengths and weaknesses of the book: for while the author substantiates his supposition that the monarchy was hurt by the Conti conspiracy, his further assertion that the coverup was successful undercuts the theory that the prince's disloyalty inspired other subsequent revolutionaries.

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