

Citizens: A Chronicle of The French Revolution

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THE FOURTEENTH OF JULY, 1789

Bernard-Rene de Launay had been born in the Bastille, where his father had been governor, and he would die on the evening of the fourteenth of July in the shadow of its towers. The aristocratic revolutionary de Sade sneered at the "soi-disant marquis whose grandfather was a valet-de-chambre." The truth was that the governor was a typical minor functionary of the old regime, reasonably conscientious if somewhat dour; certainly an improvement on martinets like Governor de Berryer, who had made Latude's life so wretched.

On the fourteenth of July he was, with good reason, apprehensive. By default the entire integrity of royal authority in Paris seemed to have devolved on him. The Baron de Besenval had virtually evacuated the center of the city. The commandant of the Invalides had sent him the huge consignment of 250 barrels of powder (about thirty thousand pounds), yet he had only a modest force with which to defend it. In response to an urgent request for reinforcements, he had been given, on July 7, a further thirty-two men from the Swiss Salis-Samade regiment to add to the eighty-two invalides pensioners stationed there. Well known in the faubourg as amiable layabouts, the invalides were unlikely to defend the fortress to the last man. Worst of all, in the event of siege, the Bastille had only a two-day supply of food and no internal supply of water at all. In the end, that was what probably decided its capitulation.

In front of the outer courtyard were gathered about nine hundred Parisians. They included a few men of standing and property like Santerre, a friend of Reveillon's who owned the famous Hortensia Brewery, which specialized in the English-style ales and stouts that were in great demand in the capital. There were also a sizable number of defecting soldiers and gardes francaises. But making up by far the largest number were local artisans living in the faubourg Saint-Antoine-joiners, cabinetmakers, hatters, locksmiths, cobblers, tailors and the like. There were also a good number-twenty-one according to the official list of the vainqueurs de la Bastille-of wine merchants, which is to say owners of the cabarets that served as well as sold wine and which were the headquarters of neighborhood gossip and politics. One of them, Claude Cholat, whose wine shop was in the rue Noyer, produced a justly famous "primitive" graphic rendering of the day's events. Of the six hundred of whom we have information, as many as four hundred in the crowd had immigrated to Paris from the provinces, and since July 14 saw the price of the four-pound loaf reach a record high, most of their families were undoubtedly hungry.

They were also prey to considerable fear. During the night rumors had circulated that troops were about to march or were already on their way from Sevres and Saint-Denis to crush the Paris rising. And the Bastille seemed to be heavily munitioned, with fifteen eight-pounder cannon on the towers and a further three in the inner courtyard pointing at the gates. Twelve more guns on the ramparts could fire pound-and-a-half balls, and in his nervousness de Launay had even assembled a bizarre collection of siege missiles like paving stones and rusty ironmongery to drop on the assailants, should that be necessary.

The initial aim of the crowd was simply to neutralize the guns and to take possession of the powder. To this end, two delegates from the Hotel de Ville asked to see the governor, and since it was around ten in the morning they were invited in for dejeuner. Even by the standards of the last day of the ancien regime, this seemed a lengthy entertainment. The crowd, from the beginning, had been suspicious when

de Launay had refused entry to any but the two delegates and had demanded three "hostage" soldiers in exchange. The prolonged lunch combined with some indeterminate business around the rampart guns (in fact their withdrawal from the embrasures) deepened those suspicions. A second deputy, Thuriot de La Roziere, was sent for from the district headquarters of Saint-Louis-La-Culture, and he too was admitted to see de Launay, this time armed with specific instructions. The guns, along with their powder, should be removed and delivered to the militia representing the city of Paris, and a unit of the militia should be admitted to the Bastille. This, de Launay replied, was impossible until he had received instructions from Versailles, but he took Thuriot up to the ramparts to inspect the withdrawal of the guns.

It was about half past twelve. Not much had been achieved on either side. None of the essential demands made by Thuriot had been granted, and although he had made efforts to persuade the invalides to come to some agreement with the people, de Launay's officers had insisted that it would be dishonorable to hand over the fortress without express orders from their seniors. Thuriot decided to report back to the electors at the Hotel de Ville for further negotiating instructions. They were themselves reluctant to inflame the situation, and at half past one Thuriot was about to return to the Bastille with another elector, Ethis de Corny, equipped with bugle and loud-hailer by which the removal of the guns would be announced to the people, when the Hotel de Ville shook to the sound of an explosion followed by the crackle of musket fire coming from the fort.

While he had been gone, the impatience of the crowd had finally burst its bounds. Shouts of "Give us the Bastille" were heard, and the nine hundred had pressed into the undefended outer courtyard, becoming angrier by the minute. A group, including an ex-soldier now carriage maker, had climbed onto the roof of a perfume shop abutting the gate to the inner courtyard and, failing to find the keys to the courtyard, had cut the drawbridge chains. They had crashed down without warning, killing one of the crowd who stood beneath, and over the bridge and his body poured hundreds of the besiegers. At this point the defending soldiers shouted to the people to withdraw or else they would fire, and this too was misinterpreted as encouragement to come further. The first shots were fired. Subsequently each side would claim the other fired first, but since no one among the melee knew that their own people had cut the drawbridge, it was assumed that they had been let into the inner courtyard in order to be mowed down in the confined space by the cannon.

It was of a piece with all the other assumptions of treachery and conspiracy-of the cordial greeting behind which was the plan of death and destruction. Artois and those responsible for Necker's removal; de Flesselles, who had sent the arms searchers on wild-goose chases; the Queen, who appeared tender-hearted yet plotted revenge were all among this cast of villains as far as the people were concerned. And now de Launay, the governor who let down the drawbridge to take better aim, joined their number. It was the fury unleashed by this "deceit" that made it impossible for subsequent delegations from the electors (of which there were many) to get past the fighting and organize some kind of cease-fire.

The battle became serious. At about half past three in the afternoon the crowd was reinforced by companies of gardes francaises and by defecting soldiers, including a number who were veterans of the American campaign. Two in particular, Second-Lieutenant Jacob Elie, the standard-bearer of the Infantry of the Queen, and Pierre-Augustin Hulin, the director of the Queen's laundry, were crucial in turning the incoherent assault into an organized siege. Like a number of key participants in the events of 1789, Hulin had been a Genevan revolutionary in 1782, and on encountering Mme de Stael the previous

day had sworn to "avenge your father on those bastards who are trying to kill us," a promise she may not have found gratifying.

Hulin and Elie also brought an ample supply of arms taken from the Invalides that morning. With them were two cannon, one bronze and the other the Siamese gun inlaid with silver that had been seized from the royal storehouse the day before. It was Louis XIV's toy, then, that would end the old regime in Paris.

It was decided to aim the guns directly at the gate (since balls seemed to bounce harmlessly off the eight-foot-thick walls). Before that could be done, carts filled with burning dung and straw, which had been lit by Santerre to provide smoke cover for the movements of the besiegers, had to be removed from the approach to the gate. At some risk to himself Elie did this in company with a haberdasher familiarly known as "Vive l'Amour." The heavy guns were drawn back on gun carriages, charged and aimed.

A wooden gate now divided the cannon of the besiegers from those of the defenders-perhaps a hundred feet apart. Had they opened up at each other, dreadful carnage would have been guaranteed. But if the attackers could not see the defending guns, the defending troops were well aware of the peril they stood in. Faced with the increasing reluctance of the invalides to prolong the fighting, de Launay was himself demoralized. In any case, there was no food with which to withstand a prolonged siege, so that his main concern now was for a surrender that would preserve the honor and the lives of the garrison. He had one card-the powder. In his darkest moments he simply thought of exploding the entire store-and destroying a large part of the faubourg Saint-Antoine-rather than capitulating. Dissuaded from this act of desperation, he resolved to use the threat at least to secure an honorable evacuation.

With no white flag available, a handkerchief was flown from one of the towers and the Bastille's guns stopped firing. At around five, a note asking for such a capitulation, written by the governor-and threatening the explosion unless it was given-was stuck through a chink in through the drawbridge wall of the inner courtyard. A plank was laid down over the moat with men standing on one end to steady it. The first person on the plank fell into the moat but the second-whose identity thereafter was hotly disputed-retrieved it. The demand, however, was refused, and in response to the continued anger of the crowd Hulin was apparently preparing to fire the Siamese cannon when the drawbridge suddenly came down.

The vainqueurs rushed into the prison, liberated all seven of the prisoners, took possession of the gunpowder and disarmed the defending troops. The Swiss guards, who had prudently taken off their uniform coats, were initially mistaken for prisoners and unharmed. But some of the invalides were brutally dealt with. A soldier named Bequard, who had been one of those responsible for dissuading de Launay from detonating the gunpowder, had his hand severed almost as soon as he opened one of the gates of the fort. Under the impression that he was one of the prison warders, the crowd paraded the hand about the streets still gripping a key. Later that evening he was misidentified again, this time as one of the cannoneers who had first fired on the people, and was hanged in the place de Greve, along with one of his comrades, before the thirty Swiss guards lined up as an obligatory audience.

The battle itself had taken the lives of eighty-three of the citizens' army. Another fifteen were to die from wounds. Only one of the invalides had died in the fighting and three had been wounded. The imbalance was enough for the crowd to demand some sort of punitive sacrifice, and de Launay duly provided it. All of the hatred which to a large degree had been spared the garrison was concentrated on

him. His attributes of command - sword and baton - were wrenched away from him and he was marched towards the Hotel de Ville through enormous crowds, all of whom were convinced he had been foiled in a diabolical plot to massacre the people. Hulin and Elie managed to prevent the crowd from killing him on the street, though more than once he was knocked down and badly beaten. Throughout the walk he was covered in abuse and spittle. Outside the Hotel de Ville competing suggestions were offered as to how he should meet his end, including a proposal to tie him to a horse's tail and drag him over the cobbles. A pastry cook named Desnot said it would be better to take him into the Hotel de Ville-but at that point de Launay, who had had enough of the ordeal, shouted "Let me die" and lashed out with his boots, landing a direct hit in Desnot's groin. He was instantaneously covered with darting knives, swords and bayonets, rolled to the gutter and finished off with a barrage of pistol shots.

The Revolution in Paris had begun with heads hoisted aloft over the crowd. They had been the heads of heroes, made in wax, carried as proxy commanders. It needed a symmetrical ending: more heads, this time serving as trophies of battle. A sword was handed to Desnot, but he cast it aside and used a pocketknife to saw through de Launay's neck. A little later, de Flesselles, the prevot des marchands who had also been accused of deliberately misleading the people about stores of arms, was shot as he emerged from the Hotel de Ville. The heads were stuck on pikes that bobbed and dipped above cheering, laughing and singing crowds that filled the streets.

Nine days later there were two more heads to display: those of Bertier de Sauvigny, the intendant of Paris, and Foulon, one of the ministers in the government that was to have replaced Necker's. The latter was accused of the famine plot, so the mouth of his severed head was crammed with grass, straw and ordure to signify his particular crime. The young painter Girodet thought this popular symbolism so picturesque that he made a careful sketch as the heads passed before him.

More than the actual casualties of fighting (which, as we have seen, were very limited), it was this display of punitive sacrifice that constituted a kind of revolutionary sacrament. Some, who had celebrated the Revolution so long as it was expressed in abstractions like Liberte, gagged at the sight of blood thrust in their faces. Others whose nerves were tougher and stomachs less easily turned made the modern compact by which power could be secured through violence. The beneficiaries of this bargain deluded themselves into believing that they could turn it on and off like a faucet and direct its force with exacting selectivity. Barnave, the Grenoble politician who in 1789 was among the unreserved zealots of the National Assembly, was asked whether the deaths of Foulon and Bertier were really necessary to secure freedom. He gave the reply which, converted into an instrument of the revolutionary state, would be the entitlement to kill him on the guillotine:

"What, then, is their blood so pure?"