

# Pre-Revolutionary Violence

## Summary

Although many of the Letters focus on Paris, they also show that the duchess made considerable efforts to stay informed about events elsewhere in the country. In this example the duchess draws on her own conversations with eyewitnesses, as well as (most likely) on newspaper reports, to give a detailed account of the recent violence in Rennes. The duchess does not flinch from providing gruesome details of this attack on the Breton nobility, with whose fate she identifies keenly as someone of prominent Breton noble lineage herself. Her narrative is augmented by reflections on the national implications of this violent episode, which she correctly identifies as part of a wider political shift. The calling of an Estates General, as well as the local electoral processes this had set in train to find the requisite deputies from each of the three Estates, had turned up the volume of public debate substantially on a wide range of reform ideas. One source of considerable tension was the question of whether existing procedures meant the Third Estate would be outvoted by the other two when the Estates General finally met. Pressure was growing to ensure this did not happen. The duchess, who considered the clergy and nobility as the natural protectors of public order and traditional society, was horrified by what she saw as the Third's unnatural and destabilising pretensions to power.

## Date and place of writing

10 February 1789, Paris

## Themes

- National Politics
- Violence
- Monarchy
- Public Opinion
- Nobility

## Letter

Paris. 10 February 1789

Before speaking to you, Madame, about the events of Monday 26 January and its aftermath, which have been so wretched for the Breton nobility, I wished to wait for the facts to be clarified by the large number of people arriving here from Rennes who saw what took place.

On 26 January several members from the higher ranks of the Third went to the most famous café in Rennes to discuss their affairs. Two commoners were also there for their meal and the members of the higher Third wanted them to be turned away. One of the little people courageously replied, 'Sirs, you want to be considered equal to the greatest lords, while you don't want anything to do with common people like us, who are closer to you than you are to them.' As you can imagine those bigwigs felt insulted, and so they kicked the joker out into the street. He then started shouting that the higher Third was killing the common people, which attracted a crowd of men and women. By chance a faggot cart was passing, and so each side armed itself and started beating their rival. Then others who were more inclined to violence went to get their pistols and started hunting for gentlemen.

The first to fall into their hands was Monsieur de Boishue, formerly First Page to the king, who had kindly rewarded him for his gentleness and intelligence, and had just personally appointed him to command of a company of dragoons. His Majesty was unable to refrain from tears when hearing the fate of this young man, just 20 years old, whom the Third shot three times and then started ripping apart his body while he was still breathing, and then cut off his legs etc once he was dead. The Third also seriously wounded a young monk who had sought sanctuary in the meeting room of the Estates. The seventeen-year-old Monsieur de Saint-Riveul was killed at another location, while Monsieur des Boisxis managed to escape the Third's furious attacks after being shot and stabbed. We still do not know everyone who was wounded, and who among those may have died since.

A further difficulty is that the letters for the convocation of the Estates General appeared at the end of January, just as the nobility was being attacked in Rennes. They have announced it for Versailles on 27 April next, but with so little time available how will it be possible to integrate a body [the Third Estate] which is already so determined and so hostile to the nobility, and to individual members of the clergy and the *parlements* who are themselves noble?<sup>1</sup> How to give to those same enemies the necessary confidence in the Third so that they can negotiate amicably with it over the king's affairs, and those of his subjects? Ah! We find the timing inauspicious, considering that Brittany is not the only province to have experienced disturbances! And in truth the Third, in wanting to become the equal of the provincial nobility, often the best and purest, will discover that the entire nobility is set against it. We therefore believe that events which are sure to occur on a daily basis will inevitably postpone the Estates General, if France can ever hold one at all.

## Notes

1. Thirteen *parlements* spread across the country acted as France's supreme courts of appeal and also had substantial administrative powers within the ancien regime state. Many posts in these courts conferred noble status on those who held them. The *parlements* were abolished in August 1790.

## Source

Archives nationales de France, F7 4775/1 (notebook 1, pp. 4-5).

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