

Revolutionary Paris in July 1789

Summary

The duchess reflects on events in the Revolution so far and the rising power of Paris's new municipal government. She castigates a number of groups she deems responsible for ongoing excesses. These trenchant opinions, along with the reference to hidden stores of weapons, raise the question of how much of this commentary is based on her own pre-formed ideas and how much might be coming from 'live' sources like newspapers and her social circle.

Date and place of writing

22 July 1789, Paris

Themes

- National Politics
- Violence
- Monarchy
- Nobility
- Religion
- Municipal Government
- Enlightenment

Letter

Paris. 22 July 1789

The bourgeois, the people, the troops, the Estates General, and even the king, everyone is part of the Third Estate now, Madame, and as a result all appears to be calm. But actually the spirit and heart of these people is far from being so. This army of French-style philosophers is not troubled by inflicting a thousand ills, or even death, on those who have offended them or whom they hate. They are driven partly by the desire to outdo each other; and also by a thirst to acquire things just to cause a stir; and by jealousy towards nobility or the wealth of others. They believed they had covered up the assassinations of Monsieur de Launay, governor of the Bastille, Monsieur Puget, the excellent staff officer major, Monsieur de Flesselles, the Provost of Merchants, and the gunner who fired at them, by spreading calumnies, various falsehoods and printed mischief. Since then, they have begun to be jealous of one another. People are saying that Monsieur the duke d'Orléans is angry with Monsieur Necker for not warning him about this most recent conspiracy, and that the duke says that Necker subjected the king to extreme humiliation in making him come to

Paris on 17 July, like a king who had come to ask forgiveness from his people for removing his own Director of Finances, and for choosing ministers to his taste. He also accused Necker of leaving the king's carriage unguarded and surrounded by deserters, and every other kind of scoundrel, and when the king did arrive at the Hôtel de Ville he cried hot tears on having my cloth merchant, and other gentlemen of a similar status, seated near him and talking to him in the most familiar fashion. For there is no more impertinent group than the committee of the Third Estate of the city of Paris ever since the king handed over the reins of his empire to them.¹

Day after day workers gather in every parish of Paris, and in the huge churches within the city's monasteries. Weapons and gunpowder are guarded there continuously. The priests and monks cause unending scandal by joining in this wretched war, and together have sent eight deputies to the Hôtel de Ville. There, they take in everyone who is the subject of an accusation, set free whoever they want, and deliver the rest into the hands of the people to suffer a cruel death. It is to these Gentlemen of the City that you must present yourself to secure the necessary permissions to leave and visit your country property if you want to get there safely. If you don't have this, just like with the Prince de Montbarrey, the Mesdames de Brionne and de Puységur,² they will bring you back to the Hôtel de Ville and detain you, burn any papers you have on you, inflict all kinds of snubs on you. Meanwhile the people will be clamouring to send you to your death.

Monsieur Bailly, who was once, they say, a mere financial clerk, and is now beloved by the Third Estate in the Estates General, where he presided over the so-called union of the three Orders,³ has had himself made Provost of Merchants⁴ following the murder of Monsieur de Flesselles, while the young marquis de Lafayette is commander of the Paris militia. The fate of the latter fills me with pity: the young son of one of my good friends, to whom he is very precious, I cannot think of him at the head of the populace without shuddering at how such adventures typically end.

Notes

1. The king travelled into the capital on 17 July in a bid to restore his authority over the city and had no political option other than to accept and endorse the Revolutionary events of the previous week. This included allowing himself to be formally received by the Parisian Electors for the Estates General, who had transformed themselves into a new city council (the Paris Commune).
2. The identity of this 'Madame de Puységur' is unclear, but she may have been a relative of the count de Puységur (1727-1807).
3. The previous month's transformation of the Estates General into the National Assembly.

4. A pre-Revolutionary term roughly equivalent to Bailly's Revolutionary role as the first mayor of Paris.

Source

Archives nationales de France, F7 4775/1 (notebook 1, p. 16).

Published at www.revolutionaryduchess.exeter.ac.uk as part of the AHRC-funded project 'The Duchesse d'Elbeuf's Letters to a Friend, 1788-1794', a collaboration between Queen Mary, University of London and the University of Exeter.