

A King Imprisoned? The October Days

Summary

On 5-6 October 1789, a Parisian crowd led by thousands of women marched out to demonstrate at Versailles and forced the royal family to relocate to Paris after a violent confrontation. Although the origins of the march lay in subsistence issues, and the involvement of women in such campaigns had a long tradition in France, the longterm consequences of this 'revolt' (the duchess's term) against established authority were political. Both the monarchy and, in due course, the National (Constituent) Assembly were forced to move into the centre of Paris. Here, it was no longer possible for the Revolutionary political elite to place themselves at a comfortable distance from other Revolutionary groupings that were beginning to coalesce at other levels of French society. Over time, the National Assembly would be put under pressure from a number of sources in the capital, including an increasingly radical popular movement. As for the monarchy, the duchess's diagnosis in the final paragraph is correct: this was an early political humiliation and the royal family was effectively a prisoner of the capital, and of the Revolution, from this point onwards. Louis remained king for another three years, albeit with significantly weakened powers and influence. He was finally deposed in August 1792.

Date and place of writing

14 October 1789, Moreuil

Themes

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

Letter

Moreuil. 14 October 1789

Here is Louis XVI, turned prisoner of this terrible Third in a most singular fashion. This childish king, who does not know how to command with greatness, mounted on horseback and calling out for the faithful to follow him, instead amused himself by allowing his bodyguard to host a banquet for the officers of the Flanders regiment

which had just arrived at Versailles, and by making an appearance there along with the queen and the dauphin for an exchange of toasts. All of Paris knew about this by the following day, and resolved to punish both master and soldier.¹ It is alleged that on the Saturday people were giving out money in the faubourgs of St Antoine and St Marcel² to amass a fine force of champions, so that by Sunday 4 October all the capital's inhabitants would know that there would be a revolt. The ringing of the tocsin during the night confirmed this, and in the morning 6000 women went to the Hôtel de Ville where they seized arms and ammunition. They were joined by the common people and in the end by the Paris militia, with Monsieur de Lafayette at their head. The revolt arrived at Versailles at dawn on 6 October. The women led the way, and they wanted to enter the king's apartment but the royal bodyguard blocked them. One of the men who was said to have killed a woman was wounded and this led on to the bodyguard being butchered until they pleaded for mercy and Monsieur de Lafayette was able to secure this. But the heads and hearts of two of the guards were carried away to be paraded around the gardens of the Palais-Royal.

The king had already promised to honour the wishes of his people and come back to Paris, and before leaving Versailles he approved all the decrees from the Estates General which he had previously been unwilling to sanction.³

The carriages of this sad king were all ready to take him I know not where (some were saying to Metz). Instead, he got in with the queen and the dauphin and, escorted by those women in their carts and by the nation's troops, then went immediately on his arrival in Paris to the Hôtel de Ville in order to pay homage to that infamous committee which is running everything, and which had been expecting him.

How could one believe such a thing to be possible, Madame, were it not that all of France knows it for a fact? Their king a prisoner of their Third Order, without the nobility at court, or in the Estates General, ever thinking of going to the aid of the king's bodyguard which, isolated, was crushed while trying to defend him? This king, said to be ready to flee from this revolt, and who then submitted to its yoke? This king, tearful at the alarm felt by the princesses,⁴ and yet looking on dry-eyed as his bodyguards were shot and had their throats cut, and asking for pardons of those who had been captured, of his people who were guilty of *lèse-majesté*⁵ and of brutal and abominable acts! Lastly, this king of France dragged into the city, like any common fugitive of his kingdom, by men and women who are the dregs of society, and taken to his Tuileries château where there is nothing for him except some huge rooms, last swept two reigns previously and filled with monstrous spiders! Good God! What horrors for our lifetime, and for posterity!

Notes

1. The controversy lay in the combination of the bad optics of a banquet held at a time of food scarcity in the capital and rumours that the tone of the occasion (and the phrasing of the toasts) had been unpatriotic and hostile to the Revolutionary cause.
2. These were two working class areas of Paris whose inhabitants played an important role in the early Revolution by taking to the streets to exert pressure on the political elites. Both lay to the east of the city centre, Saint-Antoine on the Right bank (the Bastille was on its western edge) and Saint-Marcel on the Left.
3. The king had delayed giving royal approval to two crucial pieces of Revolutionary legislation: the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen and the August Decrees abolishing feudalism. Without such approval these texts were not legally binding.
4. There were two present: the king's daughter, Marie-Thérèse (1778-1851), and the king's sister, Madame Élisabeth.
5. A broad French legal term covering not only physical attacks on the king but also crimes which undermined the monarchy's authority and the nation's security.

Source

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