

Confrontation at Moreuil

Summary

This entry details a lengthy confrontation between the duchess and local inhabitants at her Moreuil estate. The new political landscape taking shape across France produced many such confrontations between those who had held political, economic and cultural power in the pre-Revolutionary world and those who sought to take advantage of the rapidly changing situation for themselves or their communities. The duchess presents herself facing down an angry crowd to save the life of one of her employees. Her account also demonstrates the tension between 'popular' Revolutionary demands and behaviour on the one hand, and the more conservative priorities of local and national Revolutionary authorities on the other.

Date and place of writing

30 August 1790, Moreuil

Themes

- The Duchess
- Violence
- Municipal Government

Letter

Moreuil. 30 August 1790

I wanted to conceal from you, Madame, the insurrection which I had the honour of finally hosting here, but it made Madame Rougé Mortemart so terrified for her children¹ that she took them to Paris in a bid to get them to Heidelberg, and while she was in the city for eight days she told my friends about it and this created something of a sensation.

Beginning on 7 and 8 August some hotheads from around here were knocking down the marker posts for my seigneurie, whether or not they were decorated with my coat of arms. I thought it was just out of a general hatred for what they signified and so I said nothing.² The following Tuesday [the 10th August] three or four hundred men and women entered my courtyard and demanded: 1. That I should give up the right to enforce charges for the use of my mills, with the exception of making a cash charge of 6 sous per quintal of grain; and that I should refuse those who would ask to make payments in kind.³ This was really a matter for the people and the owners of

the mills to decide between themselves because the business would be expensive to run at this price, but I accepted it pending a legal decision or judgment on the matter. The second request, which surprised me greatly, was for me to hand over my estate manager so he could be hanged right in front of me. They said many bad things about this man, but no evidence was produced and this meant I had a duty not to listen to them. However, a terrified Madame de Rougé and her children begged me to at least promise that, in return for his life being spared, I would no longer employ him. After first defending my position by demanding that the villagers pay me all that they owed me in wood etc, I gave in to all this crying and squealing about the gibbet and to the pleas of the children, on condition that the crowd would do the man no more harm.

They wanted to draw up a written statement in which one of my servants would appear as an alleged witness to malicious comments by the poor fellow. The people did not like it when I objected to this. The tocsin was sounded against me and seven or eight hundred people filled my courtyard. At their head were the municipal officials, in their finest regalia. Just like the previous day, the most malicious were threatening everyone with the noose. I no longer appeared to be untouchable in this regard, and I reproached them for being so harsh when I had always paid such attention to their needs. I opened my arms and told them, 'If my long life angers you, cut it short: you will be doing me a service given that I can see how much the people of Moreuil have turned against me. I have now given you my word that I acquiesce to whatever you wish, and if this is insufficient I will confirm it in writing to you.'

The same day, 11 August, I gave a note to the mayor which was identical to what I had promised everyone. The municipality appeared to be satisfied by this, and the mayor in particular sought to pacify the crowd and resisted the idea of marching back with them to my property. This meant he was himself threatened with the gibbet, as well as the *procureur*⁴ who supported him. When news of this came to the attention of our friends in Montdidier, the wise municipality of Amiens and the leaders of the *maréchaussée*,⁵ we were afforded every courtesy and offer of help. This stiffened the resolve of our own municipality, which was then bold enough to parade the red flag⁶ all around the town and its limits on Friday 12 August. The men among the people laughed this off as a meaningless gesture, but the women were scared by it and by Saturday they were asking for the white flag.

Since then, the people have merely watched to ensure that the estate manager does not come to my chateau, and instead one of my servants has to go to him for such information as I require to continue work on the accounts he manages.

A few days after our little adventure, reports of it reached the marquis de Crussol d'Amboise. His longstanding friendship towards me meant that these events made more of an impression on him than they had done on me, and he quickly had a committee in the National Assembly write to our municipality to remind it of the respect I was due for all the work I had done on their behalf. The local priest read

out this letter from the pulpit, and I thank God I was not there to hear it. The letter seemed so extraordinary to my former vassals that they thought we had made it up, but some of them were nervous about its authenticity and this was enough to make the situation safer for me, and I believe that everything has quietened down now. Since I did not experience any physical pain my health has not suffered at all, and nobody could feel better in their 83rd year.

Notes

1. The marquise de Rougé had two young sons: Bonabes-Alexis and Adrien.
2. These would have been wooden posts used to mark out the duchess's land. Attacks like this—at Moreuil as elsewhere—were likely encouraged by the Constituent Assembly's abolition of nobility in June 1790.
3. The purpose here appears to have been to secure free use of the mill for people's private needs. The ban on payment in kind could reflect a belief that such arrangements left customers open to exploitation.
4. A high-ranking municipal legal officer, who also took on many of the duties of a deputy mayor.
5. Roughly equivalent to a mounted police force and a longstanding element of France's national system for maintaining law and order. Renamed the *gendarmerie* in early 1791.
6. The Martial Law against Tumults (21 October 1789) had designated the red flag to signal (and authorise) the use of force by state authorities to control and disperse mass gatherings.

Source

Archives nationales de France, F7 4775/1 (notebook 1, pp. 44-45).

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