

# Revolutionary France Faces Military Disaster

## Summary

After much triumphalist rhetoric in Parisian political circles ahead of France's declaration of war against Austria on 20 April 1792, the harsh reality of military conflict had a brutal impact on Revolutionary morale within a matter of weeks. The duchess pieces together the news reaching Paris about events on the frontline, including terrifying reports that defeated French soldiers had roasted and eaten their commanding officer. Across the country, the grave military news stoked fears of another conspiracy to undermine the Revolution.

## Date and place of writing

25 May 1792, Paris

## Themes

- Violence
- Monarchy
- Public Opinion
- War and Counter-Revolution

## Letter

Paris. 25 May 1792

Our military experts, Madame, clearly predicted the two routs suffered by our troops on 29 April. One advance, undertaken by 12 to 13,000 men under the command of Monsieur de Biron, had planned to reach Mons, and Brussels the following night, but General Beaulieu forced them into a painful retreat. After leaving some troops in the town to keep check on anyone there who might be Revolutionary sympathizers, Beaulieu advanced towards the French at some numerical disadvantage. Making use of an area of higher ground, where he placed 1,500 of his own troops and 200 émigrés, Beaulieu managed to force 5 to 6,000 of the opposing men into retreat for fear of being cut down by them. At this, General Biron and the rest of his army imagined they were faced with an immense enemy force, and they threw down their weapons and stores, and took flight, every man for himself .

A second attack, commanded by a young officer of the Dillon family,<sup>1</sup> was only intended as a dummy attack on Tournai, and involved just 5 to 6,000 men. However,

the senior Imperial officer in command in the town, the count d'Happoncourt, is also a very good general, and he had the same success of making the French run away. In this instance the wretched people involved took the shame they experienced and combined it with a blind rage that then caused much greater dishonour for them. They imagined that only treachery could have caused such a defeat and they started a major insurrection upon their return to Lille. They cut up their commander Monsieur Dillon into pieces, roasted these over a huge fire, and then ate them.<sup>2</sup> His aide de camp was also cut to pieces and left for dead, while another well-respected officer accompanying them was killed. Six uhlans<sup>3</sup> were hung, as well as a refractory priest who had come to give these poor men the last rites.<sup>4</sup> These horrors, Madame, stunned the greater part of our ferocious Assembly, so imagine the effect they have had at court, and on respectable people. What fear will it provoke among our commanding officers? General Rochambeau has sent in his resignation, and Monsieur de Luckner has been nominated in his place. Monsieur de Biron no longer wants his own command and will instead serve as an ordinary soldier in the Army of the North. Monsieur d'Estaing has refused to go to Strasbourg to take over the army Monsieur Luckner has left, and it is claimed that many other officers have quit our armies altogether.

The response of the people of Paris and elsewhere, blinded to the truth, has been to say that the court has revealed our masterplan to our enemies, and that they have such a great advantage over us because they are so well informed. This villainous calumny has given rise to some terrifying proposals in the Palais-Royal, down on the quays, and even outside the Tuileries Palace. We have trembled for all us aristocrats, and even more so for the royal family, although the latter must believe they retain strong support because they have not stopped going out for walks,<sup>5</sup> even when the possibility of taking their lives is being discussed everywhere, as well as the fact that no would-be regicide has yet made such an attempt.

## Notes

1. The Dillon family was an Irish military family of considerable distinction. Dillon's Regiment had first been raised in Ireland in 1688 during the Jacobite War. French support for the deposed (Catholic) monarch James II in this conflict led to the regiment being retained in service to the king of France throughout the eighteenth century.

2. General Dillon's body was indeed burnt by a mob in Lille's central square, but there is no evidence confirming that cannibalism then took place.

3. Polish light cavalry.

4. Refractory priests were those who had refused to swear an oath of loyalty to the nation according to the terms of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, the Revolution's

controversial religious reforms of 1790. Refusing the oath was regarded by the Revolutionary authorities as a sign of Counter-Revolutionary sympathies.

5. The royal family regularly went for strolls in the gardens which formed part of the Tuileries palace complex. These gardens were partly accessible to the public.

## **Source**

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