

The August Revolution: The Fall of the Monarchy

Summary

The summer of 1792 was a perfect storm for the French monarchy, with rising demands for a Republic amid military defeats and the lasting resentment caused by Louis XVI's failed attempt to escape Paris. The storm broke in early August as claims that the king was fatally undermining France's war effort proved the catalyst for mass protests in the capital and an attack on the Tuileries Palace on 10 August. Although Louis and his family were granted sanctuary in the National (Legislative) Assembly and the king's executive functions were initially only suspended, the political battle to retain a monarchy was lost by the end of that day. Elections were soon called for a new representative body to decide on another constitution for the country, and on 22 September deputies elected to the resulting National Convention confirmed what had been a practical reality for over a month: Revolutionary France was now a Republic.

Date and place of writing

14 August 1792, Paris

Themes

- National Politics
- Violence
- Monarchy
- Municipal Government

Letter

Paris. 14 August 1792

The month of July, Madame, ended in an ugly fashion, but that was as nothing compared to the horrors of this month of August. It started on the 4th with Monsieur Pétion's frightful deputation to the Assembly on behalf of all the sections of the Paris Commune to demand the removal of the king.¹ They wanted to continue seducing the people and use their anger to destroy this royal dynasty, and take down all the decent folk in the kingdom along with it. The odious Pétion secured a date for the king's deposition to be debated in the Assembly, but on 9 August the royalists and the *Feuillants* came together in defence of the king. The Jacobins were furious at

not being able to get a decree passed removing the king from power, and had to settle instead for the suspension of his executive powers. This last measure was one which, with the arrival of the foreign armies anticipated, appeared even to offer the king some protection. Pétion realised this and was able to find another way. Ah! Madame, the devil is more shrewd than decent folk! Can you comprehend that this man came back suddenly to the Assembly to announce that the tocsin would be rung at midnight, there would be a call to arms, and all the people and the *fédérés*² would surround the Tuileries Palace; and that all the evening papers repeated this threat after him. I say to you, can you comprehend that Assembly members with a majority over the Jacobins did not decree the arrest of Pétion; or that, when these others failed to do so, His Majesty did not require this himself so that Pétion could be questioned and judged in secret; or that the bourgeois did not join together with the nobility in order to stop the crimes which everyone could see were planned for 10 August? Twenty heads then could have saved perhaps another twenty thousand later, and brought this war to an end instantly.

This wretched 10 August demonstrates the truth, not of any prophecy, but of the care taken by Pétion, Manuel and Santerre to intimidate or seduce both the unfortunate French people and their poorly advised masters. Day of horror, you have yet to reveal to us what the latter's intentions really were. Why hold the review of the National Guard and the Swiss Guards at 6.00 or 7.00 in the morning, only to abandon them at 8.30 so Your Majesty could hand yourself over to the National Assembly? The previous day people were saying that the vast majority of the National Guard would unite with the Swiss Guards as well all the nobility who were gathering there to defend you, but you abandoned them. They only learnt what was happening gradually, group by group: the National Guard switched sides at once and the nobility did what they could to escape. Only the Swiss stood firm and fired, and in response any of them who were not killed by canon or musket were cut down by hand.

Oh! If only those combined forces had stayed loyal and resolute! Instead, the royal family is now at the mercy of the Jacobins. After having them stay for several days inside an Assembly in permanent session, and making them sleep in a committee room, yesterday evening Monsieur Pétion moved their sleeping quarters to the Temple, along with Mesdames de Lamballe, de Tourzel and other ladies-in-waiting to the queen.

The hatred of the people for the Swiss Guards was so furious that they also wanted to kill our Swiss porters. Some perished, and we hid many others, including my own.³

Notes

1. Here are a translated extract from this petition, and a contemporary printed copy of the French original.

2. First used in 1790 as a collective term for National Guard units who travelled from all over France to Paris in order to take part in the annual 'Fête de la Fédération' (Festival of the Federation) commemorating the Storming of the Bastille, 14 July 1789. However, the 'Fédérés' of 1792 travelled to Paris not only to celebrate the fall of the Bastille but also to volunteer for the war effort. The presence of large numbers of armed Revolutionaries in the capital, at a time when the military threat posed by Austria and Prussia was growing by the day, was an important factor in the push towards deposing Louis XVI on 10 August.

3. The city residences of people of the duchess's social class always featured porters at the door or gateway for practical and security reasons. A popular belief that all porters were Swiss may have been a simplified version of the true employment picture, but job specialisation by migrant communities is a common historical phenomenon.

Source

Archives nationales de France, F7 4775/1 (notebook 3, p. 87).

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