

Revolutionary Massacre: Paris in September 1792

Summary

At the start of September 1792 Revolutionary tensions boiled over in the capital in the wake of the fall of the monarchy and news of fresh military reversals. The result was a series of mob attacks on the prison network and the killing of thousands of inmates. The duchess writes about what became known as the 'September Massacres' while they are still taking place. While the impact of the war and the politics of division are noted, it is the duchess's religious beliefs that provide the frame for her analysis of this traumatic event.

Date and place of writing

4 September 1792, Paris

Themes

- National Politics
- Violence
- Monarchy
- War and Counter-Revolution
- Religion

Letter

Paris. 4 September 1792

The Lord punishes us according to our deserts, Madame. But my belief in his mercy grows stronger and stronger and raises the hope that he will look favourably on us for reciting our prayers, judging us not as perfect children but rather as children submitting to his correction and to the rulings of his Holy church, and who are faithful to the king he has given us.

Such is my spiritual journey in the 4th year of our subjugation, with the executioner's blade now hanging so closely over the heads of every member of the first two Orders that we cannot tell if it will fall today or tomorrow.

On Sunday 26 August incense was burnt at the altar of *la patrie*¹ in honour of the patriots killed on the 10th. This madness happened because they wanted to keep the people, who are still behaving like bandits, in check. This is why they made

them carry around banners emblazoned with massacres they have committed, as well as a so-called 'Tomb for Tyrants'. We feared that this festival would cause disturbances but, thanks be to God, there have not been any so far. It was only afterwards that news came through of the fall of Longwy. This was only announced very late that day, and it inspired the terrified Assembly to unleash all kinds of furies. They commenced a new wave of house searches targeting people who were not mixed up in anything at all. Lucky were those who had honest local commissioners doing this: everyone else was subjected to all kinds of trouble, in particular the seizing of chapel ornaments, of silver — sometimes reimbursed with *assignats*² — and of printed works which were then burnt in their courtyards. These measures culminated in the confiscation of all horses,³ in making half of all the young men here leave Paris, in the house arrest of a number of the bourgeois and priests, and by sending even old men and children out from Paris to confront the enemy forces. Yet all the while the bandits who were arriving constantly from all parts of the country were being kept back here.⁴

But other disagreeable and even worse events were still to happen this very month: on Saturday the 1st it was announced in the Assembly that Verdun was under siege, that enemy forces were advancing into the kingdom, and that a huge effort would be required to repel them. The Assembly immediately gave orders for the following day: to sound the tocsin, fire the alarm canon,⁵ deploy the National Guard to the frontline along with any other troops that could be sent, fortify Paris, and establish a military camp outside the city with a dozen Assembly members to work there on a daily basis.

The week's crimes began on Sunday 2 September in the Place du Carrousel with the beheading of a poor man who had cried 'Long live the king and Lafayette'. After this, at about two or three in the afternoon, when the tocsin was rung, the people overran the prisons en masse. At the Carmes prison they massacred all the bishops and priests who had been locked up there, with the exception of the abbé Sicard, teacher of the deaf and dumb. We all know that this honourable collection of former leaders of various religious communities, of young and godly seminary students, and of respectable bishops were leading a life of penitence and fervent prayers. This gives us every reason to hope that France, in her present state of cruelty, has enriched the church with a great treasure, since it is being estimated that there are more than a hundred of these holy martyrs. We believe the number could be nearer two hundred.

In addition, the people have also massacred all the redcoated Swiss soldiers from the king's bodyguard who had survived the events of the 10th. Nobody knows the cost to France in men caused by the events of 2-3 September, but in Paris alone it runs into several thousand. All the prisons have been emptied. The most notable of those killed included Marie-Thérèse of Savoy-Carignan princess de Lamballe, who died after being cut right open, and then had her severed head paraded around the Palais-Royal.

While these days of crime unfold, days which bring joy to Satan and his devils, another great injustice continues: the royal family is still held prisoner, and it is only their enemy gaolers who are aware of all the hardships they inflict on that family. It was feared that the people wanted to dispose of them during those terrible days, just like all the other prisoners. But the guard on them was doubled, with that infamous mayor of ours arguing that these hostages could one day prove important.

Notes

1. A common, highly politicised Revolutionary term meaning 'the fatherland' and linked to support for the Revolutionary cause.
2. A paper currency linked to the Revolution's programme of mass nationalisation of property, in particular church property. It was created in 1790 and was beset by inflation problems from an early stage.
3. In fact, we know from later in the Letter series that the duchess still has her own horses until May 1793. This detail is not part of the translated extracts available on this database.
4. This appears to be a reference to provincial volunteers for the war effort.
5. Located on Pont Neuf, very close to where the Assembly met.

Source

Archives nationales de France, F7 4775/1 (notebook 3, pp. 91-93).

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.