

The Criminality of Revolutionary France

Summary

The deposed king Louis XVI is going on trial for crimes against the Revolution and the duchess regards this as further evidence of Revolutionary France's descent into wanton criminality. The move by the National Convention to try Louis is characterised as a 'rebellion' against God and against an ancient legal and social order which has been fatally undermined by the Revolution. The duchess traces the blame back further than 1789, placing the ideas of the Enlightenment at the heart of this destructive vortex. Such arguments were becoming a common feature of Counter-Revolutionary and pro-royalist attacks on the French Revolutionary project. A more personal perspective sits alongside this critique of the nation as a whole, bearing witness to the increasing pressures felt by sections of French society (particularly in Paris) who were not aligned with the Revolution's increasingly radical turn.

Date and place of writing

15 December 1792, Paris

Themes

- National Politics
- Violence
- Monarchy
- Public Opinion
- Revolutionary Justice
- Religion
- Enlightenment

Letter

Paris. 15 December 1792

Oh these are such terrible days for you, my country! I will not take part in your rebellion against your God and against your king. This senseless cruelty is to your shame and ignominy. Yes, Madame, I have the misfortune of being born French in the 18th century. The great God created the world through his word, and in these past few years I have watched mankind, who God made in his own image, abandon

himself to all his base passions. *They are corrupt, and have become abominable*,¹ above all through forgetting and scorning their Creator.

Here is the mainstay and support for all today's crimes: this vermin of so-called *philosophes*² whom we have nourished in our hearts for so long, tearing us apart, body and soul. In this unfortunate kingdom they have finally managed to overcome everything that is majestic and comforting about God's laws for sinful, mortal mankind – replacing them with assorted pipedreams which stir up all man's passions, even the darkest ones. In the end, Madame, their machinations have driven us so far in under four years that there are no more catholics in France, nor any kind of Christian: no one dares speak out about God the creator and intercessor any more, and neither does anybody dare to defend the innocent or condemn the guilty in accordance with his law and his word. The result is that the crimes being committed become more and more appalling.

There is no longer any point in complaining about the sacking of chateaux belonging even to those who are not émigrés, about the nightly assaults, or about the arrests being made without justification. These are just normal events now. However, when you think where this French fury against their king and his family could be leading, it makes the hairs on your head stand on end.

Open your eyes, you people in lethargy! Liberty seduces you, but it works contrary to good order if it is not based on sound laws. You reject God's laws and you adopt none of the laws of any wisely-governed country. 700 or more kings are your masters in the capital and in municipalities, districts and ministries. All of them abuse these powers to forge new chains for you, while our wealth – which we used to support you – is destroyed. We all tremble at the prospect of being accused, arrested, imprisoned, and then having our heads cut off. Ah! Delightful liberty! It is the same with equality. The great and the good have fallen into the dirt, it is true. Isn't that enough to satisfy you, you ungrateful people? How often have the great tried to help you in difficult times? How many times have they answered your needs in sickness and in health? Wicked people, what will you gain by dispensing with your king and your local lord when instead you are getting a thousand harsher and more dishonest masters.³

Notes

1. A quotation from the Bible, Psalm 13.

2. The writers and intellectuals at the heart of the Enlightenment movement in eighteenth-century France. Contemporary critics regarded the likes of Voltaire and Rousseau as a dangerous, destabilising force within French society, and Counter-Revolutionaries regularly blamed the Enlightenment for unleashing the Revolution on an unfortunate and misguided French population.

3. The comments in this paragraph can be compared to the duchess's criticism of a burgeoning Revolutionary bureaucracy and its attendant political class two years previously.

Source

Archives nationales de France, F7 4775/1 (notebook 3, pp. 99-101).

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