

# Reflections on Political Repression

## Summary

The duchess explains how the balance of political power in the capital has recently shifted in a more radical direction, and considers the repercussions for her own social milieu. Her account presents the previous Sunday's triumph of the Jacobin (or Montagnard) faction over their Girondin rivals in the Convention as due to a combination of the Jacobins' relentless, ruthless politicking (aided by their command of the Paris streets via cooperation with the sections and Commune) and the incompetence and strategic blunders of more moderate deputies.

## Date and place of writing

5 June 1793, Paris

## Themes

- The Duchess
- National Politics
- Violence
- War and Counter-Revolution
- Revolutionary Justice
- Religion
- Municipal Government

## Letter

Paris. 5 June 1793

Ah! Madame, everyone could see it coming: the *Feuillants*,<sup>1</sup> or the Right wing, who believed themselves to be the strongest, and who really were so when something came to a vote in the National Convention, have just been outmanoeuvred by the Jacobins, the Commune and nearly all the sections, who all move as one currently.

The leaders of the Right were Brissot, Pétion and all 22 deputies who had called for a plebiscite to save their king from execution,<sup>2</sup> or at least so that he should not be dragged there simply through the stupidity and rage of the common people, our robbers and assassins. It was this which gave a pretext to the Commune, goaded on by the Jacobins, to exploit this so-called crime so that the Right would be punished. Two scoundrels from the Commune, Hébert and Varlet, advocated there relentlessly

for the National Convention to be purged of the traitors in its midst, and Paris itself of 7 to 8,000 suspects.

The Committee of Twelve believed it would be sufficient simply to denounce these two unpleasant men to the Convention for the meetings they had organised with all the section presidents present, not only at the Commune but also at the mayor of Paris' own residence and at the Archbishop's Palace. [The Committee believed] a majority in the Convention would then vote to imprison Hébert and Varlet and require the mayor of Paris<sup>3</sup> and the commander of the National Guard<sup>4</sup> to appear before them and explain these events which they had previously failed to inform the Convention about.

I then began to suspect, Madame, judging from the stir this order provoked in the Mountain, the Commune and the sections, that the Jacobins were going to prevail over the Nation's representatives, since they were more audacious and daring. Indeed, between 27 and 28 May the Convention handed back the two guilty men to the Commune, exonerated the mayor and the commander of the National Guard, and abolished the Committee of Twelve.

This victory was not enough for the imperious Jacobins. They had had time to win over more people in the National Assembly and in the sections, and on 31 May they dared to fire the alarm canon,<sup>5</sup> ring the tocsin, and arranged for all the menfolk to march through the streets in armed battalions, be they gentlemen, bourgeois or our own servants. While this was happening, many representatives from the Convention were arrested, as well as the ministers Clavière and Le Brun, the ex-minister Roland, the members of the Committee of Twelve, a huge number of gentlemen and wealthy bourgeois, and to cap it all, forty or so ladies, including Mesdames de la Marck, de la Rochefoucauld, Joseph de Monaco, de Créqui, de Maulévrier, de la Suze, d'Ossun, and de Kerhoent.

This is the fifth day that no one has paid me a visit. I only see my own servants or those sent by friends of mine to tell me that they dare not leave their own homes. I am therefore not informed about what is happening and we will know even less in the future, as all journalists have been ordered, on pain of imprisonment, not to give us any news about the foreign conflict<sup>6</sup> or the civil war<sup>7</sup> apart from along officially endorsed lines. In truth the result is such obvious nonsense that we do not bother reading any of it, and this means it is likely we will have little warning of the sweeping raids to which we could be subjected.

In the meantime, we do not know if we will just be thrown in the local guardhouse with the fleas, bugs and lice, or if, after being robbed of all our possessions, they will finally butcher us and so bring an end to our suffering. Even if my age ends up protecting me from such violence, Madame, I will still have the profound sadness of witnessing the agonies of my brothers in Jesus Christ.

## Notes

1. The duchess must be referring to the Girondin grouping in the Convention because the *Feuillants* had disappeared from the political scene back in early 1792. Whether deliberate or not, this mislabelling by the duchess links to popular belief at the time about the conservative political sympathies of the Girondin faction who had just been the targets of a purge.
2. A reference to Girondin attempts to secure a referendum or 'appeal to the people' to ratify the Convention's decision in the trial of the king.
3. This post was then held by Jean-Nicolas Pache.
4. This post was then held by François Hanriot.
5. Located on Pont Neuf, very close to where the Convention met.
6. By this point in 1793 France was at war with Austria, the Dutch Republic, England, Prussia and Spain.
7. In the Vendée.

## Source

Archives nationales de France, F7 4775/1 ( notebook 4, pp. 115-116).

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