

Revolutionary Justice in the summer of 1793

Summary

The duchess offers news and personal reflections on recent developments in the French Revolution (as seen from her home in the heart of the capital) almost a year on from the fall of Louis XVI. These range from the assassination of radical journalist Jean-Paul Marat by Charlotte Corday, the arrest and trial of another army general as France's military situation continued to deteriorate, and a further round of political repression, through to concerns about changes to the Revolutionary system of paper money (the *assignats*) and the duchess registering her disgust at what she regards as the irreligion pervading Revolutionary society.

Date and place of writing

31 July 1793, Paris

Themes

- National Politics
- Violence
- Public Opinion
- War and Counter-Revolution
- Revolutionary Justice
- Religion
- Municipal Government

Letter

Paris. 31 July 1793

Soon after I had the honour of writing to you at the beginning of the month, Madame, the assassination of the Wicked Marat occurred,¹ and even if this was no great loss we are no less horrified by it, because killing is forbidden. An amazon struck this fine blow, a perfect philosopher for our times in that she seems to have set aside religion in matters of life and death. She appeared to have no semblance of fear at her execution, expecting to go straight to the Elysian Fields afterwards. This young woman was born in Caen of military stock. She was scarcely 25 years of age, and nice looking. The death of Marat, a Genevan Protestant, has been followed by

funerary honours totally contrary to Catholic teaching. Do not punish us as our sins deserve, my God.²

Monsieur de Custine arrived in Paris without incident around 20 July – to set out his military plans, so he said. There were already rumblings at the Jacobins and in the municipality that Custine remained ineffectual against our enemies, and it was implied that he might well betray us, just like Dumouriez before him. Although the Convention was less agitated about this, it still felt obliged to arrest him on the 22nd and send him to the Luxembourg, joining those Assembly members who had been unable or unwilling to flee.³ But it was deemed insufferable that Custine was in a prison which thus elevated him above the status of a mere soldier, and so on the 23rd he was transferred to the city authorities to be judged by the Revolutionary Tribunal. Unfortunately for the general, Condé surrendered due to a lack of supplies and the 4000 men in its garrison were sent to Germany as prisoners of war. Even worse, on the 27th news arrived that Mayence, which had been sent a garrison of 22000 men, had just capitulated. The garrison was marching out of the canton to hand over all its weapons to the Prussians before recrossing the French frontier having undertaken not to fight against the Prussians or their allies for the next year. Oh! This blow was such a shock that the general and all the ex-nobles serving in his army on his general staff are now seen as Counter-Revolutionaries. People feel they must be judged and condemned, and I believe that many heads are going to roll. Yesterday the general was moved again, this time to the Conciergerie so that his trial can be completed this week if possible.

For the convenience of being able to kill a lot of people quickly there, they are splitting the Revolutionary Tribunal into two parts which will pass judgement simultaneously.⁴ A curious thing has happened there. Its president, Doiré, has been put in gaol for alleged errors he has made, as well as thefts.⁵ Also, in the army they are going to judge all suspect officers by courts martial.

The number of prisoners they are locking up here each night is frightening, and yesterday it was the turn of the deputies for Calvados: Messieurs Duprat, Minvielle, and Vallée.⁶ Many contractors, speculators and hoarders have been gaoled, and they even want to get Monsieur the duke de Biron. A wit was saying yesterday that at this rate the entire army would end up under arrest.

Someone from every household in the city is still being given the pleasure of waiting outside their local bakery at 4 or 5 o'clock each morning, because otherwise, it is said, they will not get any bread. I do not know if this is said in jest, because everyone gets some in the end, or if there is substance to this type of famine. We will find out soon enough.

After dinner today the Convention decreed that the *assignats* known as 'Royal', because they feature a depiction of the late king,⁷ will no longer be legal tender except in dealings with the nation, whether paying its taxes or buying its nationalised

property. Already lots of people are saying that this is a partial bankruptcy. Others are really stretched for everyday provisions because, believing these *assignats* to be better than the republican ones, they made a point of keeping hold of them, and are left without any of the other kind.

And as for what are, Madame, merely speeches, terrible blasphemies were pronounced at the Cordeliers against our holy religion when the heart of Marat was placed alongside his body there on the 28th of this month.⁸ They dared compare him to our holy redeemer, and to prefer Barabbas⁹ and other apostates to him yet again. It makes one's hair stand up on end! Without entering into comparisons, I note again the relentlessness of the Jacobins, who demand with one voice that the Convention should deport every single ex-noble from the kingdom, with a view to confiscating their property. Ah! How can it be that our fellow French citizens could become thieves like this? And that souls baptised in the love of a God have forgotten everything they ought to remember about his two most important commandments? When such grievous offense is given to our Lord, can I complain myself about suffering the hardship imposed by my brothers? I have loved them, I have sought to share my worldly possessions with them, and yet they cannot endure my existence. And perhaps, Madame, they will cause this writing to be my own tender farewell.

Notes

1. On 13 July 1793.
2. Marat's embalmed body was paraded in the bath where he had been assassinated, and his heart was then removed, embalmed separately and hung in an urn at the Cordeliers Club. This Club had been founded in May 1790 and was the most prominent radical political club in Paris. Its membership was much less elite than the Jacobin Club and it had strong ties with the capital's popular movement.
3. A reference to the ongoing campaign against Convention deputies who were deemed part of the Girondin faction. A number had fled Paris when prison threatened.
4. The duchess is referring to public debate about the efficiency of the Paris Revolutionary Tribunal's operations. In fact it was not until September that the Convention authorised the splitting of the Tribunal into multiple sections to increase the speed with which it processed cases.
5. This must be a reference to the first president of the Paris Revolutionary Tribunal, Jacques-Bernard-Marie Montané. It is unclear where the duchess picked up the name 'Doiré', but no one of that name worked at the Tribunal.

6. The duchess's information is partly correct: an arrest order went out for these three deputies on 30 July 1793, but Vallée was able to escape capture. Also, none of the three were representatives from Calvados.

7. See their role in postmaster Drouet's identification of Louis XVI ahead of the king's capture at Varennes.

8. See note 2 above.

9. Barabbas is a Biblical figure. When the arrested Jesus appears before Pontius Pilate it is Barabbas whom the crowd demand be set free.

Source

Archives nationales de France, F7 4775/1 (notebook 4, pp. 117-119).

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