

The Execution of Marie-Antoinette

Summary

The execution of the former queen Marie-Antoinette on 16 October 1793, after a highly politicised show trial at the Paris Revolutionary Tribunal, was considered by the duchess to provide another damning indictment of the French Revolution's political and social destructiveness. However, this does not save Marie-Antoinette and her Austrian Habsburg family from criticism as well. She attacks Marie-Antoinette for her failure to put up a public fight against her prosecution, and she condemns this former queen's Habsburg relatives for seemingly refusing to come to her aid, either militarily or diplomatically. The duchess goes on to place this high political drama in a wider context, showing both her concern at the increasing scale of repression meted out on her social milieu and some satisfaction at the early signs of deadly infighting among the Revolution's political class.

Date and place of writing

22 October 1793, Paris

Themes

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

Letter

Paris. 22 October 1793

It was on the 16th of this wretched month, Madame, that the French sent their queen to be executed, nearly eight months after their king, her honourable husband. Louis XVI went to the scaffold a wholly virtuous man, whereas perhaps Austrian archduchess Marie-Christine¹ had the faults of any young and beautiful woman who had been her own mistress from the age of 14 or 15. But far from showing any malice, we can confirm that she never did anybody any harm at court, and that she gave much help to people in need. This great princess – in her own right as well as through her marriage – was nonetheless condemned to death eight days

ago because of suspicions (without any evidence) that she had consorted with the coalition powers. On Wednesday she was put in a tumbril with her hands tied behind her back and accompanied by a confessor, and she was taken to the Place de la Révolution. There at midday she had her head cut off.

That is all there is to say. People believed in the spirit of this daughter of the great Theresa, and she always bore herself with great dignity. And yet she has been condemned. The vilest, most dishonourable claims were made against her, and then they killed her. She did not even claim her God-given right to demand justice. She did not say a word and only opened her mouth as a christian queen who has been violently attacked, and who knows through her belief in God how to die. For the sake of her family's honour, I would like to believe that this princess only allowed herself to be degraded during her cross-examinations and at her death in an attempt to show solidarity with her husband's own profound humbling. For it is impossible to believe that after contemplating death for four years, and coming as it did after the greatest of suffering and the most complete humiliation, it should still hold a sting capable of drowning out all other senses and feelings.

Her family, her brothers, sisters and nephews all seem to have viewed this unfortunate queen with great indifférence.² Not a single soldier was deployed to prevent her total ruination. No one even dared send a messenger to reiterate the threats which had previously been made,³ and the people could hardly believe that her death would not cause a reaction from the Austrians.

But no, these gentlemen have let themselves be overrun in their siege camp outside Maubeuge. That seige has now been lifted, and our patriots say that they have driven them away. I do not recognise this German army, so well-equipped with cavalry and artillery, which our volunteers are defeating more often than they are beaten themselves.

For a month now, every waking hour is marked by suffering. It is our relatives, our friends who they drag from their houses at night to be put five or six together in a single rank prison room. They are made to pay for this privilege, and as consolation they are told they will be held there until peace is declared.⁴ It is rare for a day to pass without any heads being cut off, often it will be two or three people, and even just for something said. On the 8th of this month it was Gorsas, from the National Convention, who became the first proof sovereign representatives no longer receive justice either, and it is being said that 20 or more are due to be tried and will suffer the same fate.⁵ Nearly all 700 of them will go the same way soon enough. There is not much love lost when a group starts to kill one another, and you do not need to have a lively faith to see the hand of God already preparing rods of punishment.

Notes

1. Clearly the duchess is referring to Marie-Antoinette here. It is surprising (but perhaps a rare sign of her old age) that she has confused her name here with Marie-Antoinette's sister Marie-Christine. The duchess had been pleased to be welcomed at the latter's court back in 1791 during her residence at Tournai.
2. As a daughter of Empress Maria Theresa, Marie-Antoinette had siblings and other relations in influential positions across Europe.
3. The most notorious of these threats (and the one which had, contrary to the duchess's line of argument here, actually done serious damage to the French royal family's survival prospects) was the Brunswick Manifesto (25 July 1792). Issued by the Duke of Brunswick on behalf of the Austrian and Prussian forces marching against France in the summer of 1792, this text had threatened to sack Paris if the royal family were harmed.
4. A reference to the notorious Law of Suspects (17 September 1793), which stipulated that those imprisoned as 'suspect persons' (meaning those suspected of Counter-Revolutionary sympathies) would not be released 'until the peace' - i.e. until the French Republic had been secured against the domestic and foreign threats that it was currently fighting. Note that the link in this footnote only provides access to an abbreviated version of this law.
5. This is a reference to the forthcoming trial of Brissot and twenty-one other Girondin deputies. The duchess describes the resulting executions in her next Letter.

Source

Archives nationales de France, F7 4775/1 (notebook 4, pp. 122-123).

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