

The Terror Gathers Pace

Summary

The duchess describes the execution of Brissot and a group of his fellow Girondin deputies. She combines this with broader reflections on the trajectory of the French Revolution now that the Terror has taken a firm hold over the country. She also provides further insight into how the residents of the capital followed events in the ongoing civil war in the Vendée. This is the final entry from the long-form section of the Letters

Date and place of writing

6 November 1793, Paris

Themes

- The Duchess
- National Politics
- Violence
- Revolutionary Justice
- Nobility
- Religion

Letter

Paris. 6 November 1793

It was, Madame, in the afternoon of 31 October that all our masters, including those in the National Assembly, set a quite ferocious example for themselves. Brissot, along with twenty of his colleagues, was condemned to the guillotine, and all their possessions confiscated for the nation's profit. One of this group, Valazé, stabbed himself straight after the verdict in order to avoid the punishment; the other twenty were taken to the guillotine that afternoon.¹ The bishop of Calvados and the count de Sillery were in the same cart along with the confessors they had asked for; the others did not request one. Brissot and one other, following in the next cart, were clearly distressed. The rest, all young people aged twenty-seven, twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-two, followed on behind laughing, singing about the nation's glory, and shouting out to the people 'Long live the Republic'. And it is in this manner that these 21 individuals entered into the great light of eternity. I see in this, Madame, the Lord's hand exacting a great vengeance already, and presaging much more of this over the next year.

The Vendée has sprung back to life a little among a part of its followers, who took over Laval and blocked our army returning through Mayenne. They destroyed two battalions, including the general and a number of officers, overran one wing of the army, and put the rest to flight all the way to within six or seven leagues of Rennes. The accounts of Monsieur Barère on this subject are so full of obfuscation that you have to draw information together from every other available source in order to give yourself a sense of what happened during what he himself has called a defeat.

They continue to imprison people right across the kingdom. The state councillor was sent to the Luxembourg yesterday morning, which cuts my current social circle down to three.² But instead of sociability we have plenty of other matters to occupy us thanks to the voluntary loans – or the forced loan – and I am experiencing endless difficulty in obtaining information regarding my properties that will allow me to judge how I may respond.³

Monsieur the duke d'Orléans has just ended his colourful life on the guillotine, along with another member of the Assembly, Coustard. That makes 27 Assembly members who have now met that fate. It looks like nearly all the French who have reached the age of reason will suffer it too, one after another.

Notes

1. There were actually twenty-two deputies tried, with twenty-one guillotined and one death by suicide.

2. The abbé Honoré Joseph Royer, a former state councillor, is recorded as being imprisoned there from that date. He is therefore most likely the individual to whom the duchess is referring.

3. The forced loan on the rich had been decreed by the Convention back on 20 May 1793, but only began to be implemented from September. It was actually a form of income tax rather than any kind of loan. Back in 1789 the Constituent Assembly had demanded a 'patriotic contribution' from the upper ranks of society to help shore up the nation's finances. The duchess had paid the substantial sum of 60,000 livres.

Source

Archives nationales de France, F7 4775/1 (notebook 4, p. 124).

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