

The Fall of the Bastille

July 14th is one of the most important days in the French calendar and it is rooted in 1789 with the onslaught of the French Revolution. In 1789, the people of Paris took control of the Bastille, a prison fortress whose looming presence reminded them of the despotism of the monarchy they were desperately trying to change. While the event is referred to as the “fall” of the Bastille, it is important to note that July 14, 1789 actually marks the “surrender” of the Bastille, not its fall. Many factors led up to the Bastille’s surrender and the event left France with numerous long-lasting consequences during the revolutionary period.

While it had long been regarded that the surrender of the Bastille marked the exact beginning of the Revolution, historians now believe that the Revolution could be traced back to 1787 with the dismissal of the Assembly of Notables.¹ The beliefs that led to the people storming the Bastille were being manifested two years earlier. The economic crisis was influential in starting the insurrection, but the political scene was part of it as well.

In 1788, the grain harvest failed, causing a grain shortage all across France. The lower classes in France typically subsided on grain, with little protein, but the shortage made it harder for families to sustain themselves. The shortage caused grain prices to rise starting in August 1788, which was difficult for the working class to afford.² In January 1789, the price of grain reached its peak, 14.5 *sous*, where it remained until a few weeks after the storming of the Bastille.³ In fact, a Parisian laborer had to spend about 50 percent of his income on bread in order to maintain his normal consumption in August 1788, but by the spring of 1789, he was

¹ George Rude, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (1973; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 27.

² Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, trans. R. R. Palmer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 104, originally published as *Quatre-vingt-neuf* (Paris: University of Paris, 1939).

³ George Rude, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century: Studies in Popular Protest* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 86.

paying 80 percent.⁴ While the nobility were able to afford the rising cost of bread, it was nearly impossible for the working class wage-earners. Their frustration with the grain prices led to riots prior to the storming of the Bastille. From May to July 1789, special guards were present in the markets to suppress the riots and maintain order and the status quo.⁵ George Rudé explained, “[T]he bread motive appears almost continuously as the main stimulus in the protracted popular movement which sprang up at the end of May, [and] rose to the climax in the days of 12-14 July.”⁶ As the price increases, the standard of living decreases, causing the people to become more rebellious and prone to insurrectionary activity.⁷ The economic plight of the lower classes, stemming from the grain shortage and subsequent rising prices, was one of the main reasons that led to the people calling for the Bastille’s surrender. As the government was the body that controlled and managed the grain trade, the people began to direct their resentments towards the government and Louis XVI himself.⁸ Shortages were also attributed to hoarders; one of the main hoarders was the king.

However, while France as a whole was suffering from the grain shortage, Paris was actually exempt from the shortage. Grain shortage and the economic distress faced because of it were some of the main reasons for the start of the insurrection. If Parisians were not affected by the grain shortage, who then were involved in the march on the Bastille? Rude explained in The Crowd in the French Revolution that the majority of those who marched on the Bastille were from the Foubourg Saint-Antoine, rather than from the city itself.⁹ While not directly from the city, those who stormed the Bastille are still considered Parisians since they were from a Paris

⁴ Rude, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 201-202.

⁵ Ibid, 203.

⁶ Ibid, 202.

⁷ Donald Sutherland (lecture, University of Maryland, February 17, 2014).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Rude, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 58.

suburb. He elaborated, “[W]e should not ignore the part played by the great mass of Parisian petty craftsmen, tradesmen, and wage-earners, in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine and elsewhere, whose revolutionary temper has been moulded over many months by the rise in living costs and, as the crisis deepened, by the growing conviction that the great hopes raised by the States General were being thwarted by an aristocratic plot.”¹⁰

The spark that led directly from the insurrectionary build-up to the storming of the Bastille was the dismissal of Jacques Necker and the fear that the Estates General would be dissolved as well. Necker was replaced on July 11, 1789 and the news reached Paris on July 12th, sparking an outrage.¹¹ Necker was the only non-noble in Louis XVI’s cabinet, making him one of the people, and many credited him with being the financial genius that saved the country from bankruptcy and economic disaster. With Necker no longer in office, people worried that France would be plagued with bankruptcy, civil war, and a famine worse than the harvest shortage of 1788.¹² However, with his dismissal, the people were worried that the Estates General, specifically the Third Estate, the legislative body that was comprised of the people, would be dissolved, leaving them with even less political power than they had before. This was known as the aristocratic conspiracy.¹³ They wanted to take control and ensure they had a say in politics. At first, the people held demonstrations and closed theatres and stores, but soon learned that a more violent approach may be necessary.¹⁴

Troops were in Paris at the time, under the guise of protecting the grain supply. However, since they were not near half of the grain convoys, the people thought that the troops

¹⁰ Ibid, 59.

¹¹ Rude, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century*, 88.

¹² Paul G. Spagnoli, "The Revolution Begins: Lambesc's Charge, 12 July 1789," *French Historical Studies* 17, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 492.

¹³ Sutherland.

¹⁴ Ibid.

were there to institute the dissolution of the Estates General after Necker's dismissal. They sought to arm themselves for protection against these troops. Rudé states that "the main feature of the night of 12-13 July was the search for arms; religious houses were visited and gunsmiths, armourers and harness-makers were raided all over the capital."¹⁵ In fact, the people stole about 115,000 *livres* worth of weaponry.¹⁶ The raid continued on the morning of July 14, where approximately 7,000 to 8,000 people stormed and raided the Hôtel des Invalides and stole over 30,000 muskets.¹⁷ The Invalides also had numerous cannons, which were also taken by the Parisians.¹⁸ The people had guns to defend themselves, but they were missing the gun powder ammunition; it was not in the Invalides with the weapons.

Many people assume that since the Bastille was a prison, the people stormed it to release political prisoners to help their cause. In reality, the prison only had seven prisoners, none of which were important enough to help with the insurrection. Although there were rumors of hundreds of prisoners inside the Bastille, the Revolutionaries did not raid the Bastille for people; they raided it for the gun powder that was not at the Hôtel des Invalides.¹⁹ In order to protect themselves against the troops, the Parisians needed to have control of the gun powder that was in the nearly impenetrable fortress.

The Permanent Committee sent a few delegates to meet with the Governor, de Launay, inside the Bastille around 10:00am.²⁰ The delegates were supposed to negotiate the handover of the powder.²¹ After some time had passed, the Parisians became increasingly worried that they

¹⁵ Rude, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century*, 89.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 89.

¹⁷ Rude, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 53. And Rude, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century*, 90-91.

¹⁸ William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 110.

¹⁹ Sutherland.

²⁰ Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, 114.

²¹ Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 110.

had walked into a trap and were now prisoners of the Bastille. Given the fear of the troops occupying Paris, the Parisians decided to attempt to have de Launay surrender the Bastille. de Launay refused to surrender the Bastille and ordered the Bastille defenders to fire upon the Parisians, killing 98 and wounding 73.²² The Parisians, in retaliation, brought out a cannon taken from the Hôtel des Invalides and threatened to destroy the garrison. Eventually de Launay surrendered and the Parisians won the Bastille and its gun powder. Even with the surrender, the Parisians continued to carry out their insurrection, calling for the deaths of all those who were defending the Bastille.²³ Most slipped away in disguise and were unharmed. de Launay, however, was the first beheading in the French Revolution, despite the fact that the terms of surrender meant he was supposed to see no harm.²⁴

The Parisians accomplished a lot when they stormed the Bastille. The next day, on July 15, 1789, King Louis XVI removed the troops from Paris, making the city safe again in the eyes of the Parisians.²⁵ Three days after the Bastille fell, Louis XVI had been made aware of the inciting spark that led to the event and reinstated Necker as his cabinet's finance minister.²⁶ The people also succeeded in saving the National Assembly from dissolution.²⁷ The Committee of Electors also took control of the political power in Paris.²⁸ To the people, these two consequences ensured that they would remain politically active in 1790s France. As a result of the Bastille's surrender, the Comte d'Artois also fled France on a voluntary exile.²⁹ D'Artois was a member of the royal family and probably feared for his life, as the Parisians continued to

²² Rude, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 55.

²³ Sutherland.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, 117.

²⁶ Ibid, 117.

²⁷ Rude, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 59.

²⁸ Ibid, 59.

²⁹ Ibid, 59.

enact insurrectionary violence across the city. The people stormed the Bastille because they wanted change. Looking back on the event, it can be argued that they were successful. However, the French Revolution continued far beyond that of taking control of gunpowder, decreasing grain prices, or reinstating Necker. Was the forcing of the Bastille's surrender successful in the long-term consequences of the French Revolution or just the immediate effects?

The surrender of the Bastille, as well as the building itself, had symbolic manifestations. It was seen as a symbol of the monarchy's despotism and looming authority over the working class.³⁰ The fact that it was a prison furthered the metaphor that the Bastille represented the aristocrats' and king's control. In fact, French historian Michelet ceased to think of it as a fortress, but instead thought of it as "the personification of evil, over which virtue (in the shape of the People) inevitably triumphs."³¹ When the people of Paris overpowered de Launay and the Bastille defenders, it was seen as the people overpowering the monarchy. The symbolism of the destruction of despotism can be seen later when the Bastille was destroyed and taken apart brick by brick, with the last brick being presented to the National Assembly in February 1790, just seven months after its fall.³²

Lefebvre stated that the Bastille fell due to "the ineptitude of its governor, the defection of royal troops and the heroic tenacity of a few hundred assailants."³³ While that played a large part in the actual event, the lead-up to July 14, 1789 is the true reason the Bastille fell. The people were in economic distress and felt that the government that was supposed to be protecting them was not doing its job. They resented the monarchical despotism and aristocratic privileges

³⁰ Rude, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century*, 91.

³¹ Rude, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 3.

³² Jacques Godechot, *The Taking of the Bastille: July 14th, 1789*, trans. Jean Stewart (New York: Faber and Faber, 1970), 264, originally published as *La Prise de la Bastille: 14 Juillet 1789* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1965).

³³ Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, 116.

and feared an aristocratic conspiracy was happening. By themselves, these reasons are not enough to start the French Revolution, but combined together, they created one of the most memorable days in French history and provided the foundation for the Revolution in the 1790s.