

The Storming of the Bastille

An Anarchist's Account of The Great French Revolution

Peter Kropotkin

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July 1989 marks the bicentennial of the French Revolution. Self-organized Parisians liberated the hated Bastille prison on July 14, 1789; it was their first major victory. Unlike the American revolution which was mounted by racist land speculators and greedy commercial entrepreneurs, the French revolution resulted from a vast groundswell of people determined to rid themselves of their oppressors. In the French countryside as well as in cities, determined individuals lashed out against the clergy, aristocrats, and tax collectors. Peasants seized land from absentee nobility; throughout the country, property of the Catholic Church and the aristocracy was confiscated, desecrated, destroyed.

Before “people’s justice” was administered mechanically—by guillotine—in the name of an abstraction, the people’s oppressors (no abstraction) were struck down. An impatient populace attacked a Parisian jail and murdered aristocratic prisoners. Persons known to be state administrators were summarily killed. Even today, signs of vengeance carried out in 1789 and subsequent months remain highly visible in churches and on statues and tombs of clergy and kings.

The ruling authorities of the modern French state want people to interpret this past resistance to authority as one of the necessary steps on the way to the perfected social arrangements of 1989. In the celebratory diarrhea which is already underway in France, they invoke the revolutionary heroes in order to further their own political careers and to arouse nationalistic sentiments.

Fortunately, there is not the only interpretation of this period. To commemorate the centenary of the revolution the Russian author/anarchist Peter Kropotkin wrote a history, *The Great French Revolution*. It appeared in 1889. In his account he takes pains to distinguish the actions of the people from the machinations of those who speak in the name of the people. In the following excerpt on the storming of the Bastille, Kropotkin describes clearly the attempts of the bourgeois politicians—in effect, the King’s “loyal opposition”—to defuse the wrath of the populace.

Kropotkin’s stirring account of the outbreak of the French Revolution depicts the people effectively using the arms they had acquired through the cooperation of soldiers in the King’s army. This is not an image today’s rulers are eager to spotlight. In subsequent chapters of his history, Kropotkin recounts how a new gang of rulers duped the self-organized French masses who had so effectively overturned the supposedly “eternal” old order.

Both volumes of Kropotkin’s history are available from the FE bookstore.

The Storming of the Bastille

From the dawn of July 14, the attention of the Paris insurrection was directed upon the Bastille, that gloomy fortress with its solid towers of formidable height which reared itself among the houses of a populous quarter at the entrance of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine...

It is...probably that the popular instinct, which, ever since the 12th or 13th, understood that in the plans of the Court to crush the people of Paris the Bastille would play an important part, decided in consequence to get possession of it.

It is true that the garrison of the Bastille numbered only 114 men,...and that the Governor had done nothing towards victualling the place; but this proves only that the possibility of a serious attack on the fortress had been regarded as absurd. The people, however, knew that the Royalist plotters counted on the fortress, and they learned from inhabitants of the quarter that ammunition had been transferred from the arsenal to the Bastille on the night between the 12th and 13th. They perceived, also, that the Governor, the Marquis de Launey, had already placed his cannon in position on the morning of the 14th, so that the people could be fired on if they massed themselves in the direction of the Hotel de Ville.

It must also be said that the people had always detested prisons, such as the Bicetre, the dungeon of Vincennes and the Bastille...

In any case,...on the evening of the 13th some musket shots were being exchanged between the detachments of armed Parisians, who passed close to the fortress and its defenders, and that on the 14th, from the earliest hours of the morning, the crowds, more or less armed, who had been moving about the streets all through the preceding night, began to assemble in the thoroughfares which led to the Bastille. Already during the night the rumor ran that the King's troops were advancing...and the crowds moved off eastwards and barricaded the streets northeast of the Hotel de Ville.

A successful attack on the Hotel des Invalides gave the people an opportunity of arming themselves and provided them with some cannon. Since the previous day middle-class men, delegated by their districts, had been calling at the Hotel des Invalides to ask for arms, saying that their houses were in danger of being plundered by the thieves...

The authorization had not yet arrived when, on the 14th, by seven o'clock in the morning...a multitude of seven or eight thousand men suddenly poured out of the three neighboring streets at a quick pace. Helping one another, "in less than no time" they crossed the fosse which surrounded the esplanade of the Hotel des Invalides, swarmed over the esplanade and took possession of twelve pieces of cannon and one mortar.

The garrison, already infected with a "seditious spirit," made no defense, and the multitude, spreading everywhere, soon found their way into the cellars and the church, where they discovered 32,000 muskets concealed, as well as a certain quantity of powder. These muskets and cannon were used the same day in the taking of the Bastille. As to the powder, on the previous day the people had already stopped 36 barrels which were being sent to Rouen; these had been carried off to the Hotel de Ville, and all night long powder had been distributed to the people, who were arming themselves.

The removal of the guns by the crowd from the Hotel des Invalides was done very slowly. At two o'clock in the afternoon it was not yet completed. There would therefore have been quite enough time to bring up troops and disperse the people, especially as infantry, cavalry, and even artillery were stationed close by at the Military School and in the Champ-de-Mars. But the officers of these troops did not trust their soldiers; and besides, they must themselves have hesitated when they were confronted with this innumerable multitude, composed of persons of every age and every condition, of which more than 200,000 had flooded the streets for the last two days.

The people of the faubourgs, armed with a few muskets, pikes, hammers, axes, or even with simple cudgels, were moving about in the streets, thronging in crowds to the Place Louis XV (now Place de la Concorde) surrounding the Hotel de Ville and the Bastille, and filling the thoroughfares between. The middle classes of Paris were themselves seized with terror on seeing these masses of armed men in the street.

"WE WANT THE BASTILLE!"

Hearing that the approaches to the Bastille were invaded by the people, the Permanent Committee at the Hotel de Ville, [a newly established body of middle-class politicians —FE note in print edition], sent on the morning of the 14th some persons to parley with de Launey, the Governor of the fortress, to beg him to withdraw the cannon leveled on the streets, and not to commit any act hostile to the people; in return, the Committee, usurping powers

they did not possess, promised that the people “would not set on foot any vexatious proceedings against the place.” The delegates were received very affably by the Governor, and even stayed to breakfast with him until nearly midday. De Launey was probably trying to gain time while waiting for definite orders from Versailles, which did not come, as they had been intercepted in the morning by the people. Like all the other military chiefs, de Launey must have realized that it would be difficult for him to stand against the whole people of Paris assembled in the streets, and so he temporized. For the time being he ordered the cannon to be drawn back four feet, and closed the embrasures with wooden planks, so that the people should not see through them.

Two more deputations were sent to the Governor by the Permanent Committee but they were not received.

Both of them demanded of the Governor the surrender of the fortress to a body of the middle-class militia, which would guard it jointly with the soldiers and the Swiss.

Luckily, all these compromises were thwarted by the people, who understood that the Bastille must be captured, cost what it might. Being in possession of the muskets and the cannon from the Hotel des Invalides, their enthusiasm was steadily increasing.

People thronged the streets adjacent to the Bastille, as well as the different courtyards which surrounded the fortress itself. Presently a fusillade began between the people and the soldiers posted on the ramparts. Whilst the Permanent Committee were striving to allay the ardor of the assailants, the crowds, shouting, “We want the Bastille! Down with the bridges!” rushed toward the fortress. It is said that on seeing from the top of the walls the whole Faubourg Saint-Antoine and the street leading to it quite black with people marching against the Bastille, the Governor almost swooned. It appears even that he was on the point of surrendering the fortress immediately to the Committee of Militia, but that the Swiss opposed it.

The first drawbridges of that exterior part of the Bastille were soon battered down, thanks to one of those audacious deeds of some few persons who are always forthcoming at such moments. Eight or ten men, with the help of a tall, strong, Pannetier, a grocer, took advantage of a house that was built against the exterior wall of the Forecourt to climb this wall, astride of which they moved along as far as a guardhouse standing close to the little drawbridge of the Forecourt, and thence they leaped into the first court of the Bastille proper, the Government Court in which was the Governor’s house. This court was unoccupied, the soldiers having retreated with de Launey into the fortress itself.

The eight or ten men, having dropped into this courtyard, with a few blows of an axe lowered first the little drawbridge of the Forecourt and opened its gate, and afterwards the larger one. More than three hundred men then rushed into the Government Court, and ran to the other two drawbridges, the greater and the lesser, which, when lowered, served to cross the wide moat of the actual fortress. These two bridges, of course, had been raised.

Here took place the incident which wrought the fury of the people of Paris to its full pitch, and afterwards cost de Launey his life. When the crowd thronged into the Government Court, the defenders of the Bastille began to fire upon them, and there was even an attempt to raise the great drawbridge of the Forecourt, so as to prevent the crowd from leaving the Government Court and obviously with the intention of either imprisoning or massacring them.

THE PRISON IN FLAMES

Thus, at the very moment when [the bourgeois politicians] were announcing to the people in the Place de la Greve that the Governor had promised not to fire, the Government Court was being swept by the musketry of the soldiers posted upon the ramparts, and the guns of the Bastille began to hurl cannonballs into the adjoining streets. After all the parleying which had taken place that morning, this opening fire upon the people was evidently interpreted as an act of treason on the part of de Launey, whom the people accused of having lowered the two first drawbridges of the Forecourt, for the purpose of drawing the throng under the fire from the ramparts.

It was then about one o’clock. The news that the cannon of the Bastille were firing on the people spread through Paris and produced a two-fold effect. The Permanent Committee of the Paris militia hastened to send another deputation to the Commandant, to ask him if he would receive there a detachment of militia who would guard the Bastille jointly with the troops.

But this deputation never reached the Commandant, for a close fusillade was going on all the time between the soldiers and their assailants, who, crouched along some of the walls, were firing at the soldiers serving the guns. Besides, the people knew that the deputations from the Committee would only throw cold water on the attack. "It is no longer a deputation they want; it is the siege of the Bastille; it is the destruction of this horrible prison; it is the death of the Governor for which they are loudly clamoring"—reported the deputies when they returned.

As to the people, as soon as the news of the firing spread through the town, they acted without anyone's orders, guided by their revolutionary instinct. They dragged the cannon which they had taken from the Hotel des Invalides to the Hotel de Ville.

The firing by this time had been going on for more than three hours. The people, not in the least dismayed by the great number killed and wounded, were maintaining the siege by resorting to various expedients.

One of these was the bringing up of two cartloads of straw, to which they set fire, using the smoke as a screen to facilitate their attack on the two entrances, the greater and lesser drawbridges. The buildings of the Government Court were already in flames.

JOY IN THE STREETS OF PARIS

The cannon arrived just at the moment they were wanted. They were drawn into the Government Court and planted in front of the drawbridges and gates at a distance of only 90 feet.

It is easy to imagine the effect that these cannon in the hands of the people must have produced on the besieged. It was evident that the drawbridges must soon go down, and that the gates would be burnt open. The throng became still more threatening and was continually increasing in numbers.

The moment soon came when the defenders realized that to resist any longer was to doom themselves to certain destruction. De Launey decided to capitulate. The soldiers, seeing that they would never get the better of the whole of Paris which was coming to besiege them, had some time before advised capitulation, and so about four o'clock, or between four and five, the Governor ordered the white flag to be hoisted and the drums to beat the chamade (the order to cease fire), and descend from the battlements.

De Launey himself gave up the key that opened the entrance of the lesser drawbridge. Immediately, the mass of besiegers took possession of the fortress.

As soon as the bridges of the Bastille had been lowered the crowd rushed into the courtyards and began to search the fortress and free the prisoners entombed in the oubliettes. There was great emotion, and tears were shed at the sight of the phantoms who issued from their cells, bewildered by the light of the sun and by the sound of the many voices that welcomed them. These poor martyrs of royal despotism were carried in triumph by the people through the streets of Paris. The whole town was soon delirious with joy on hearing that the Bastille was in the hands of the people, and their determination to keep their conquest was redoubled. The coup d'etat of the Court had failed.

In this way the Revolution began. The people had won their first victory. A material victory of this kind was essential. It was necessary that the Revolution should endure a struggle and come out from it triumphant. Some proof of the strength of the people had to be given, so as to impress their enemies, to arouse courage throughout France, and to push forward everywhere towards revolt, towards the conquest of liberty.

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