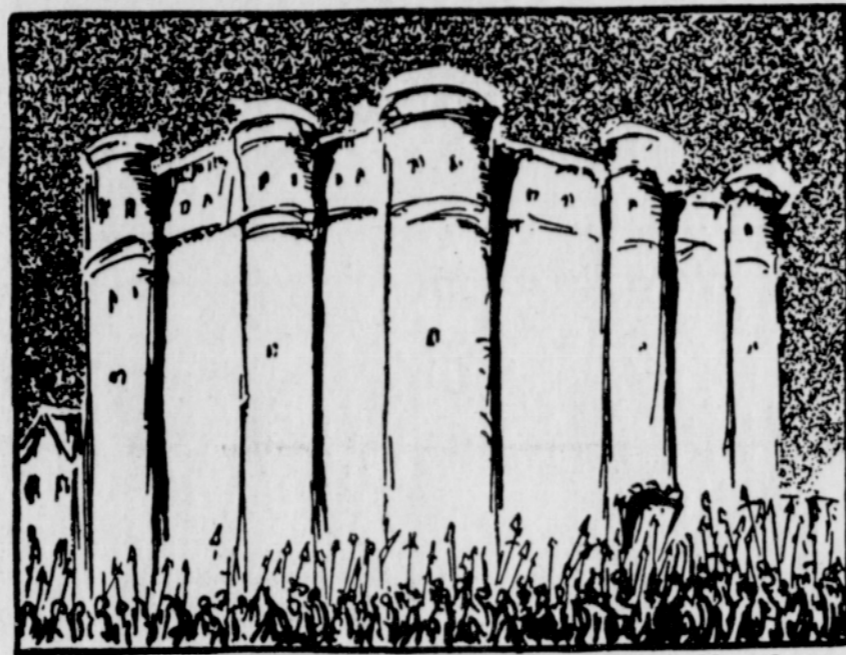


LIBERTY AND THE BASTILLE

by Katrin Bridget Snow



Heinrich Van Loon

If you stand at night in the center of Paris' golden-lit bridge, La Pont de la Concorde, and face roughly west, you will see to the right the Tour Eiffel, its graceful lines and small lights against a dark blue sky. To the left is the Cathedral de Notre Dame, sitting quietly at a bend in the slow river, looking small in the distance. It's not far from the Cathedral to where you stand, perhaps a thirty minute walk, past the Palace of Justice, past the Louvre museum where one king used to hunt on horseback down the long halls, through the garden of the Tuileries to the Place de la Concorde. La Place de la Concorde is a whirlpool of cars four deep, swirling around a tall monument at the center, then streaming down the Seine or up the Champs Elysees. The U.S. Embassy is just on the other side of the Place, as are the fine leather glove and handbag shops. This is what you would see as an American visitor to the city.

If, however, you were a Parisien factory worker in the summer of 1789, you might have tread those thirty minutes from the Hotel de Ville behind Notre Dame to Les Invalides, between the Pont de la Concorde, and taken one of the thirty-two thousand muskets stored there to defend yourself against the King's troops rumored to be surrounding Paris. And if you were a woman a few years later, you might have sat with Dickens' Madame DeFarge in the Place de la Concorde near the guillotine, and knitted, as tumbril after tumbril rolled past, carrying aristocracy to be beheaded.

Tradition has it that the French Revolution began with the storming of the Bastille in a peasant's revolt against aristocratic power, the fourteenth of July, 1789. But the crowd's original intent was not to free prisoners; it

was to demand ammunition to protect the people of Faubourg St. Antoine, towards whom the Bastille cannon was pointed. There had been minor riots for three days over the state of the parliamentary assembly at Versailles, and Parisiens feared more violence from the aristocracy and military. The people of Faubourg St. Antoine feared cannonfire from the Bastille to the west, and an imminent attack from some thirty thousand troops rumored to be coming from the east. There were only seven prisoners in the Bastille on July 14, 1789, none political prisoners. The fortress had long been used only for discreet imprisonment of the wealthy or influential. While it still represented despotism for the workers, few, if any, of the thousands amassing outside of it that day were in a position to know who might be inside the fortress.

The government had been unsteady for some time, but the balance of power tipped discernably towards the Assembly in mid-June when King Louis XVI ordered the parliamentary assembly, the Third Estate, to dissolve, and they refused. The King stopped just short of using military force. Instead, on July 11, Louis sent the director of finances, Necker, into exile. Bankers and shopkeepers who had looked to Necker's fiscal policies to restore a sound economy, protested and marched up the Champs Elysees, into skirmishes with the King's soldiers. Communications with the court at Versailles were cut off July 13. Rumors flew that the King's troops were surrounding the city, strengthened with large groups of brigands, the outlaws who destroyed crops from village to town and survived through smuggling and violence. Parisiens made the trek to the Bastille on the fourteenth for ammunition and for self defense.

They did not know that the governor inside the fortress, De Launay, had no provisions, no orders from Versailles, an ineffective cannon, and a garrison of mostly aged soldiers who did not want to open fire at the people. Negotiations

between De Launay and members of the bourgeoisie began amicably, until each side, misinterpreting the other, thought it was under attack. Crowds pushed across the drawbridge, most of the garrison escaped, and the rest were killed. De Launay made it as far as the Hotel de Ville before his head was speared to parade around the city. It was the beginning of a violence that would escalate in three years to the Reign of Terror, the bloody extermination of the aristocracy, romanticized in "A Tale of Two Cities" and "The Scarlet Pimpernell."

It is controversial whether or not the economy played a large role in the Revolution of 1789. The price of grain had been the source of unrest and riots in the provinces since early that year. Relaxed export laws had pulled much excess grain from storage and the harvest of 1788 was poor. Bread prices doubled in Paris and quadrupled in the provinces. Vintners were especially hard hit since the grape harvest had been abnormally good, driving down the price of wine. The aristocracy was suspected of a conspiracy to hoard grain and keep the price up; the brigands terrorizing the countryside were suspected of being in the employ of the aristocracy.

However, it was Necker's dismissal that provided the people of Paris with a concrete reason for massive protest. Necker had a name for reform and sound finance, and it had been disagreements over specific economic proposals which put the very existence of the Assembly in question. Paris was on edge over the threats to the Third Estate and the rumored looming massacre by government troops and brigands. Necker's exile was the outrage which began the riots.

In the provinces word of the Paris riots spread and peasants attacked the chateaux, (destroying records of credit and debt. Their own revolt was not a direct protest of events at Versailles; they had distrusted Necker for supposed deals with grain millers which benefited landowners. The peasants were starving, they were penniless, and they were afraid of the traveling brigands.

As the struggle continued between the King, the increasingly powerful National Assembly, and the various interests of the bourgeoisie and the working class, the food shortage did not abate. By October the aristocracy had all exited to Versailles and the Parisiens pushed for Louis' return to Paris as a solution to the unrest and economic crisis. He returned in early October to the Louvre and the Assembly followed, installing itself at the Tuileries on November 9. In the ensuing struggle for power between the King and the Assembly, the King gradually lost his sovereign rule. Few people would have foreseen the coming Terror, when the guillotine would reign sovereign over the bloody Place de Concorde.

The Tuileries are just east of the Place de la Concorde, with well groomed trees planted in even squares, and long straight paths which stretch to the Louvre. Walking north across the Pont de la Concorde, you can turn and walk through the long gardens towards the lights of the Louvre beyond, or you could meander up the Champs Elysees, admiring the fur coats and pet poodles which parade up and down the boulevard. Either way you turn, you will walk through the Place de la Concorde. History is alive in Paris. The passion is embedded in the streets. As you walk through the Place, it takes only a little concentration to imagine the streets sticky with wine and blood, and yourself pressed into the crowd, standing before the guillotine.

Katrin Bridget Snow is a frequent contributor to the Times Eagle. She currently lives in Astoria and is the program director for KMUN-FM. She lived in France a few years ago and at our request has revised her article on the storming of the Bastille from an earlier one which was printed in the Times Eagle on July 15, 1983.

Sons of Liberty

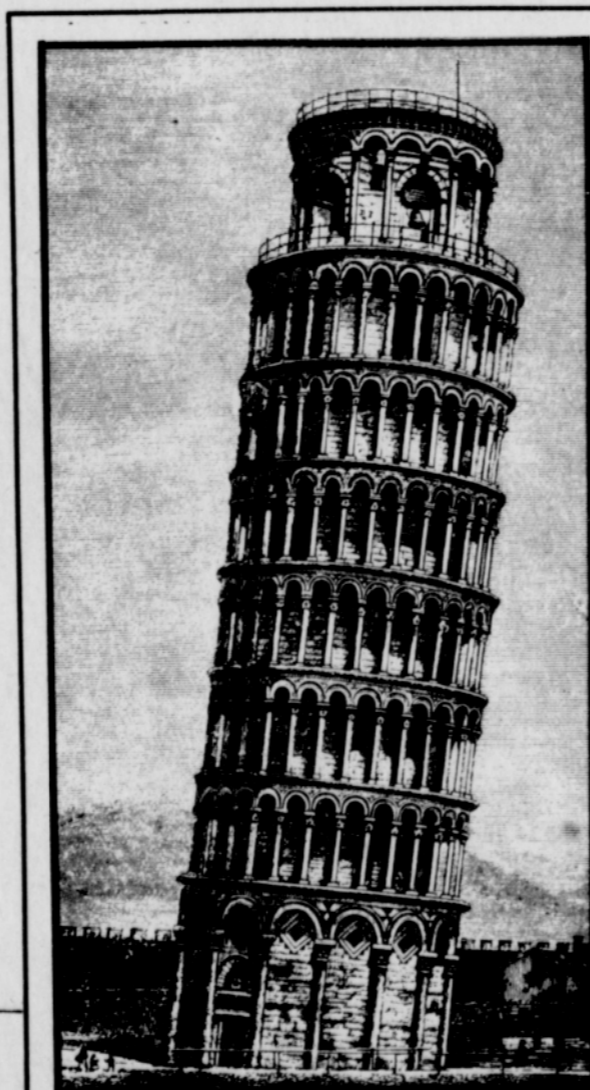
Two hundred and nine years ago, on July 2, 1776, a small group of terrorists betrayed their country and voted to commit any and all acts of terror and treason which they claimed would be necessary to separate from their government. Two days later, on July 4, they publicly declared their intention of betrayal and categorically stated their reasons for turning against their country — and they threatened to murder or otherwise terrorize all who did not join with them.

They first began their terrorist acts several years before. They burned, looted, tortured, murdered, kidnapped and held hostage representatives and supporters of their government. They ambushed and killed soldiers and policemen.

Several attempts at negotiations only increased their demands and their brutality, until finally the previous year, in April of 1775, they committed open rebellion by attacking government forces that had been sent to protect loyal citizens from their terrorism.

The terrorists cloaked their atrocities and treachery with a specious document that claimed the support of God and the sympathy of humanity. They named their perfidious sedition a Declaration of Independence.

— Michael Paul McCusker



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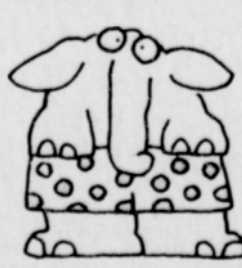


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