Reading Two: Storming the Bastille

In July 14, 1789, hundreds of ordinary Parisians poured over the drawbridge of the Bastille, the fortress-prison on the edge of Paris, in search of gunpowder; in the process, they changed the course of French history. On the very next day, men began to demolish the Bastille, taking apart the stones and chains and fashioning them into “relics of freedom”—miniature stone models of the fortress and key chains made from the iron chains. The Bastille itself became an icon of liberty and popular sovereignty. How and why the Bastille took on this symbolism and significance and what happened in Paris on July 14 that seemed to lay the foundations of liberty?

A State Prison

The Bastille had been built as a fortress in the 14th century and later transformed into a prison. By 1789, it had come to stand for the arbitrary and unjust actions of the king. It stood for injustice, not just of the criminal system but of monarchy itself. The Bastille represented the tyranny and despotism of the Old Regime, and it stood right in the heart of one of the poorest neighborhoods in Paris.

- The Bastille was a state prison for the king’s enemies, who might be grain rioters, religious opponents, spies, or writers. Voltaire, the most famous novelist and philosopher of 18th century France, was imprisoned there twice.
- Like so many political machinations of the crown, everything about the prison was draped in secrecy. Prisoners entered in carriages with drawn curtains, with the guards facing the other way so that they never knew the occupant’s identity. Jailers were allegedly forbidden to speak with inmates. Even the reason for an arrest was often secret.
- The Bastille was a representation of the absolutist monarchy as unjust, but in fact, it was actually not as bad as it had been earlier. The worst dungeons were no longer used. Prisoners could pay for food and furnishings. Ironically, the richest prisoners ate better than the hungry Parisians who would storm the prison. And in July of 1789, the Bastille held only seven prisoners.

The Politics of Hope, Hunger, and Fear

- At the end of June, King Louis XVI had reluctantly agreed to recognize the National Assembly. To many observers, matters seemed to have calmed down. But the king was also massing troops on the outskirts of Paris, about 30,000 men, many of whom were foreign mercenaries.
- What would happen next was not entirely clear: Would the absolutist king share power with a new legislative assembly and allow the deputies to write a new constitution? Would he crush the discussion of politics and smash any attempt to overhaul the state of France? In fact, Louis XVI himself did not have a plan.
- Ordinary Parisians watched the high-level politics with hope for social reforms, a more equitable tax system, and a solution to France’s problems. But what mattered most to them was the price of bread.
  - The 1788 harvest had been dismal, and bread prices rose week by week in the winter and spring of 1789. The spring of 1789 had seen scattered grain riots in the provinces and one major riot in Paris. Fear of hunger haunted the populace of France as they drew up the petitions of grievances for the Estates-General in the spring of 1789. Rumors of an aristocratic plot to hoard grain circulated everywhere. And the false rumor arose that Marie-Antoinette had said, “If they have no bread, let them eat cake.”
- The people of Paris knew that they had one hope beyond the National Assembly, one protector who could keep down the price of bread: the king’s finance minister, Jacques Necker. He may seem like an unlikely popular hero, but without his presence, people feared that the National Assembly would be sent to the provinces or disbanded.
- On July 11, three days before the storming of the Bastille, the king fired Necker, perhaps because the minister wanted to negotiate with the National Assembly. As rumor of his firing spread from Versailles to Paris, people poured into the streets, heading for the Palais-Royal. A crowd of 5,000 took up Necker’s bust from the wax museum and began to parade, chanting his name.
- The next day, different speakers at the Palais-Royal drew crowds. A skinny young man named Camille Desmoulins gave a rousing speech against the king for his actions in firing Necker: “To arms, to arms... I call on my brothers to seek liberty!” In the streets, the revolutionary mood of expectation and hope for reform was giving way to the politics of hunger and fear.

The Attack on the Fortress

- The crowds in Paris swelled from July 12 to 14; they roamed the streets looking for both grain and arms to protect Paris with the newly formed citizen militia. Wild rumors circulated: that the king’s troops would occupy Paris, that the military governor of the Bastille had been directed to point the cannon into the surrounding neighborhood, and that the deputies of the National Assembly had already been locked into the dungeons in the Bastille.
On July 12 and 13, people in the streets ransacked one monastery in search of bread. They freed inmates of several prisons. On the morning of July 14, they invaded the armory at the veterans' hospital and captured a dozen cannon and 40,000 guns to supply the citizen militia. But strangely enough, they found no gunpowder. Word went out that the gunpowder had been moved to the Bastille.

The prison was under the command of de Launay, a military governor. To guard the fortress, he had 32 Swiss soldiers and 82 veteran soldiers, many of whom sympathized with the people of the neighborhood. On the towers and ramparts stood 12 light cannon and 15 larger cannon. Another 3 heavy cannon loomed in the inner courtyard, but only one cannon shot would be fired from inside the Bastille that day.

In hopes of maintaining the peace, the electors of Paris sent a delegation to meet with de Launay on July 14. But the negotiations went nowhere, and meanwhile, the crowds outside the prison grew: artisans, merchants, day laborers, and former soldiers, armed with pikes, knives, axes, and for some, muskets.

The houses and shops of the neighborhood were built right up against the walls of the Bastille. As the impatient crowd pressed against the walls, several men climbed onto the roof of a perfume shop against the outer rampart and jumped down into the outer courtyard. They hacked through the pulleys of the drawbridge to the outer courtyard, which crashed down, killing one member of the crowd.

A single cannon shot and a volley of musket fire rang out. No one knew why it had been fired, but the crowd was sure that de Launay had commanded it. The attackers surged over the drawbridge and began to exchange fire with the defenders. Underarmed, they brought in wagons of straw and set fire to them in hopes of creating a smokescreen for the attack. They were hoping to storm the inner gates.

Around 3:00 in the afternoon, one militiaman convinced some 70 members of the French Guard (the royal troops) to join their forces and haul 5 cannons to the scene. They soon saw that cannon shots fired against the massive walls would make no impact, so they pointed the cannons at the gates of the inner courtyard. It became clear that the defenders would have to inflict heavy casualties to defend the Bastille.

It was also clear that the royal troops were not entirely on the king’s side, and de Launay knew that. He threatened to blow up the Bastille and the surrounding neighborhood, but his own soldiers, the veterans, convinced him otherwise. Around 5:00, de Launay surrendered and was killed by the mob. The Bastille had fallen.

Significance of the Fall

The fall of the Bastille made clear that Paris was solidly behind the Revolution and that some of the royal troops supported it, as well. The storming of the fortress set a pattern that would be repeated throughout the French Revolution: Paris pushing the Revolution forward; people in the streets radicalizing the Revolution, pushing it to the left.

Paris may have led, but already the Revolution was nationwide. Other urban revolts and peasant uprisings swept France in late July. News of Necker’s dismissal and the storming of the Bastille spread across France, and riots and demonstrations broke out in Caen, Strasbourg, Grenoble, and Bordeaux—the four corners of the kingdom.

In most towns, merchants and professional men—middle-class men who had long been excluded from politics—now seized power. They established permanent committees to run the cities. They also called up local militias, made up of citizen volunteers. Soon, these militia would become known as the National Guard. For the young men of France, to serve in the guard—or, later, the revolutionary army—would be a way to participate in politics, to learn about citizenship and revolutionary ideas. Back in Paris, the new city government—the Commune—chose a mayor and found a leader for its citizen militia: the marquis de Lafayette.

Many of the high aristocrats watched these developments with growing alarm. The king’s brother and some leading nobles decided to leave France, sparking a pattern of emigration that would only increase in the years to come.

The fall of the Bastille also cemented the position of the National Assembly. In effect, it cleared space for the Assembly to attempt reforms that would reverse everything the prison stood for: the despotic power and arbitrary injustice of monarchy, inequality, and the system of privileges across the land. By July 16, the king withdrew his troops and reappointed Necker.

Within four weeks, the National Assembly had begun to dismantle the system of feudal dues and privileges. Within six weeks, the deputies had written the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen to establish equality before the law.

The storming of the Bastille and the early Revolution gripped the attention of observers across Europe and the Americas. For the Americans, events in France seemed to validate their own Revolution. The British, too, welcomed this event. It looked as if the French would imitate the British form of government.

But in France, matters were hardly settled. In late July, the countryside erupted in revolt. The peasants launched a revolution of their own.