

A Conqueror of the Bastille Speaks

Having assembled at the traditional protest place in front of the City Hall, known as *place des grèves* (meaning sandbar, which it was, but which has come to mean "strike"), the crowd set off in search of ammunition. Eventually arriving at the Bastille, the crowd demanded that the few guardians of the fortress surrender. One participant, Keversau, here describes in heroic terms the event that came to symbolize the outbreak of the Revolution—the "taking of the Bastille."

Veteran armies inured to War have never performed greater prodigies of valour than this leaderless multitude of persons belonging to every class, workmen of all trades who, mostly ill-equipped and unused to arms, boldly affronted the fire from the ramparts and seemed to mock the thunderbolts the enemy hurled at them. Their guns were equally well served. Cholat, the owner of a wine shop, who was in charge of a cannon installed in the garden of the Arsenal was deservedly praised, as was Georges a gunner who arrived from Brest that same morning and was wounded in the thigh.

The attackers having demolished the first drawbridge and brought their guns into position against the second could not fail to capture the fort. The Marquis de Launay (Governor of the Bastille) could doubtless have resisted the capture of the first bridge more vigorously, but this base agent of the despots, better fitted to be a gaoler, than the military commander of a fortress lost his head as soon as he saw himself hemmed in by the enraged people and hastened to take refuge behind his massive bastions. . . .

The people infuriated by the treachery of the Governor, who had fired on their representatives, took these offers of peace for another trap and continued to advance, firing as they went up to the drawbridge leading to the interior of the fort. A Swiss officer addressing the attackers through a sort of loop-hole near the drawbridge asked permission to leave the fort with the honours of war. "No, no," they cried. He then passed through the same opening a piece of paper, which those outside could not read because of the distance, calling out at the same time that he was willing to surrender, if they promised not to massacre his troops. . . .

The French Guards, who kept their heads in the hour of danger, formed a human barrier on the other side of the bridge to prevent the crowd of attackers from getting on to it. This prudent maneuver saved the lives of thousands of persons who would have fallen into the fosse.

About two minutes later one of the Invalides opened the gate behind the drawbridge and asked what we wanted. "The surrender of the Bastille," was the answer, on which he let us in. . . .

The Invalides were drawn up in line on the right and the Swiss on the left. They had stood their arms up against the wall. They clapped their hands and cried "bravo" to the besiegers, who came crowding into the fortress. Those who came in first treated the conquered enemy humanely and embraced the staff officers to show there was no ill-feeling. But a few soldiers posted on the platforms and unaware that the fortress had surrendered, discharged their muskets whereupon the people, transported with rage, threw themselves on the Invalides and used them with the utmost violence. One of them was massacred, the unfortunate Béquart, the brave soldier who had deserved so well of the

town of Paris, when he stayed the hand of the Governor at the moment when he was on the point of blowing up the Bastille. Béquart, who had not fired a single shot throughout the day suffered two sword thrusts and had his hand cut off at the wrist by the stroke of a saber. Afterwards they carried in triumph round the streets this very hand to which so many citizens owed their safety. Béquart himself was dragged from the fortress and brought to la Grève. The blind mob mistaking him for an artilleryman bound him to a gibbet where he died along with Asselin, the victim, like him, of a fatal mistake. All the officers were seized and their quarters were invaded by the mob, who smashed the furniture, the doors and the windows. In the general turmoil the people in the courtyard fired on those who were in the private quarters and on the platforms. Several were killed. The gallant Humbert received a musket ball as he stood on the platform and one of his comrades was killed in his arms. Then Arné, a brave fellow, fixed his grenadier's headdress on the point of his bayonet and showed himself over the top of the parapet, risking his life in order to stop the firing. . . .

In the intoxication of victory the unfortunate inmates of the dungeons of the Bastille had been forgotten. All the keys had been carried off in triumph and it was necessary to force the doors of the cells. Seven prisoners were found and brought to the Palais Royal. These poor fellows were in transports of pleasure and could scarcely realize they were not the dupes of a dream, soon to be dispelled. But soon they perceived the dripping head of their tormentor stuck up on the point of a pike, above which was a placard bearing the words: "de Launay, Governor of the Bastille, disloyal and treacherous enemy of the people." At this sight tears of joy flowed from their eyes and they raised their hands to the skies to bless their first moments of liberty.

The keys were handed to M. Brissot de Warville, who, a few years before, had been thrown into these caverns of despotism. Three thousand men were sent to guard these hated towers pending the issue of a decree ordering their destruction in accordance with the will of the people.

Source: Georges Pernoud and Sabine Flaissier, eds., *The French Revolution*, trans. Richard Graves (New York: Capricorn Books, 1961), 31–37.