

# Storming of the Bastille

The **Storming of the Bastille** (French: *Prise de la Bastille* [ʁiz də la bastij]) occurred in  Paris,  France, on the afternoon of 14 July 1789.

The medieval armory, fortress, and political prison known as the Bastille represented royal authority in the centre of Paris. The prison contained only seven inmates at the time of its storming, but was seen by the revolutionaries as a symbol of the monarchy's abuse of power; its fall was the flashpoint of the French Revolution.

In France, (14 July) is the National Day, usually called Bastille Day in English.

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## Background

During the reign of Louis XVI France faced a major economic crisis. This crisis was caused in part by the cost of intervening in the American Revolution and exacerbated by a regressive system of taxation.<sup>[3]</sup> On 5 May 1789, the Estates General of 1789 convened to deal with this issue, but were held back by archaic protocols and the conservatism of the second estate: representing the nobility<sup>[4]</sup> who made up less than 2% of France's population.<sup>[5]</sup>

On 17 June 1789, the third estate, with its representatives drawn from the commoners, reconstituted themselves as the National Assembly, a body whose purpose was the creation of a French constitution. The king initially opposed this development but was forced to acknowledge the authority of the assembly, which renamed itself the National Constituent Assembly on 9 July.<sup>[6]</sup>

Paris, close to insurrection and in François Mignet's words, "intoxicated with liberty and enthusiasm",<sup>[7]</sup> showed wide support for the Assembly. The press published the Assembly's debates; political debate spread beyond the Assembly itself into the public squares and halls of the capital. The Palais-Royal and its grounds became the site of an ongoing meeting.<sup>[8]</sup> The crowd, on the authority of the meeting at the Palais-Royal, broke open the prisons of the *Abbaye* to release some grenadiers of the French guards, reportedly imprisoned for refusing to fire on the people.<sup>[9]</sup> The Assembly recommended the imprisoned guardsmen to the clemency of the king; they returned to prison and received a pardon. The rank and file of the regiment, previously considered reliable, now leaned toward the popular cause.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Necker's dismissal

Storming of the Bastille	
Part of the French Revolution	
<span></span> <div>Storming of The Bastille, Jean-Pierre Houël</div>	
Date	14 July 1789
Location	Paris, Île-de-France, France <div><span><span><span><span><span>48°51′11″N</span> <span>2°22′09″E</span></span></span><span><span>﻿</span> / <span>﻿</span></span><span><span>48.85306°N 2.36889°E</span><span><span>﻿</span> / <span>48.85306; 2.36889</span></span></span></span></span></div>
Result	Insurgent victory <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Bastille captured</li> <li>French Revolution begins</li></ul>
Belligerents	
Civilian insurgents <div>French Guards</div> <div>mutineers</div>	<span><span><span></span></span><span> </span></span> Royal government
Commanders and leaders	
<div><div>Pierre Hulin<sup>[1]</sup></div><div>Stanislas Maillard</div><div>Jacob Étie<sup>[2]</sup></div></div>	<div><div><span><span><span></span></span><span> </span></span>Bernard-René Jourdan de Launay <span><span><span></span></span></span></div></div>
Strength	
Between 688 to 1,000 armed civilian insurgents; 61 French Guards; at least five artillery pieces	114 soldiers (82 Invalides (veterans), 32 Swiss soldiers of the Salis-Samade Regiment); 30 artillery pieces
Casualties and losses	
98 killed, 73 wounded	1 killed in fighting; 113 captured (six or possibly eight killed after surrender)

On 11 July 1789, Louis XVI—acting under the influence of the conservative nobles of his privy council—dismissed and banished his finance minister, Jacques Necker (who had been sympathetic to the Third Estate) and completely reconstructed the ministry.<sup>[11]</sup> The marshals Victor-François, duc de Broglie, la Galissonnière, the duc de la Vauguyon, the Baron Louis de Breteuil, and the intendant Foulon, took over the posts of Puységur, Armand Marc, comte de Montmorin, La Luzerne, Saint-Priest, and Necker.



Jacques Necker (1732–1804),  
French minister of finance

News of Necker's dismissal reached Paris on the afternoon of Sunday, 12 July. The Parisians generally presumed that the dismissal marked the start of a coup by conservative elements.<sup>[12]</sup> Liberal Parisians were further enraged by the fear that a concentration of Royal troops—brought in from frontier garrisons to Versailles, Sèvres, the Champ de Mars, and Saint-Denis—would attempt to shut down the National Constituent Assembly, which was meeting in Versailles. Crowds gathered throughout Paris, including more than ten thousand at the Palais-Royal. Camille Desmoulins successfully rallied the crowd by "mounting a table, pistol in hand, exclaiming: '*Citizens, there is no time to lose; the dismissal of Necker is the knell of a Saint Bartholomew for patriots! This very night all the Swiss and German battalions will leave the Champ de Mars to massacre us all; one resource is left; to take arms!*'"<sup>[7]</sup>

The Swiss and German regiments referred to were among the foreign mercenary troops who made up a significant portion of the pre-revolutionary Royal Army, and were seen as being less likely to be sympathetic to the popular cause than ordinary French soldiers.<sup>[13]</sup> By early July, approximately half of the 25,000 regular troops in Paris and Versailles were drawn from these foreign regiments.<sup>[14]</sup> The French regiments included in the concentration appear to have been selected either because of the proximity of their garrisons to Paris or because their colonels were supporters of the reactionary "court party" opposed to reform.<sup>[6]</sup>

During the public demonstrations that started on 12 July, the multitude displayed busts of Necker and of Louis Philippe II, Duke of Orléans, then marched from the Palais Royal through the theater district before continuing westward along the boulevards. The crowd clashed with the Royal German Cavalry Regiment ("Royal-Allemand") between the Place Vendôme and the Tuileries Palace. From atop the Champs-Élysées, the Prince de Lambesc unleashed a cavalry charge that dispersed the remaining protesters at Place Louis XV—now Place de la Concorde.<sup>[15]</sup> The Royal commander, Baron de Besenval, fearing the results of a blood bath amongst the poorly armed crowds or defections among his own men, then withdrew the cavalry towards Sèvres.<sup>[16]</sup>

Meanwhile, unrest was growing among the people of Paris who expressed their hostility against state authorities by attacking customs posts blamed for causing increased food and wine prices.<sup>[17]</sup> The people of Paris started to plunder any place where food, guns, and supplies could be hoarded. That night, rumors spread that supplies were being hoarded at Saint-Lazare, a huge property of the clergy, which functioned as a convent, hospital, school, and even as a jail. An angry mob broke in and plundered the property,<sup>[18]</sup> seizing 52 wagons of wheat, which were taken to the public market. That same day multitudes of people plundered many other places including weapon arsenals. The Royal troops did nothing to stop the spreading of social chaos in Paris during those days.<sup>[19]</sup>

## Armed conflict

The regiment of Gardes Françaises (English: French Guards) formed the permanent garrison of Paris and, with many local ties, was favourably disposed towards the popular cause.<sup>[20]</sup> This regiment had remained confined to its barracks during the initial stages of the mid-July disturbances. With Paris becoming the scene of a general riot, Charles Eugene, Prince of Lambesc (Marshal of the Camp, Proprietor of the Royal Allemand-Dragoons), not trusting the regiment to obey his order, posted sixty dragoons to station themselves before its dépôt in the Chaussée d'Antin. The officers of the French Guards made ineffectual attempts to rally their men. The rebellious citizenry had now acquired a trained military contingent. As word of this spread, the commanders of the royal forces encamped on the Champ de Mars became doubtful of the dependability of even the foreign regiments.<sup>[21]</sup> The future "Citizen King", Louis-Philippe, duc d'Orléans, witnessed these events as a young officer and was of the opinion that the soldiers would have obeyed orders if put to the test. He also commented in retrospect that the officers of the French Guards had neglected their responsibilities in the period before the uprising, leaving the regiment too much to the control of its non-commissioned officers.<sup>[22]</sup> However, the uncertain leadership of Besenval led to a virtual abdication of royal authority in central Paris. On the morning of 13 July, the electors of Paris met and agreed to the recruitment of a "bourgeois militia" of 48,000 men<sup>[18]</sup> from the sixty voting districts of Paris, to restore order.<sup>[23]</sup> Their identifying cockades were of blue and red, the colors of Paris. Lafayette was elected commander of this group on 14 July and subsequently changed its name to the National Guard. He added the color white, the color of the King, to the cockade on 27 July, to make the famous French tri-color.



The Bastille of Paris before the Revolution

## Storming the Bastille (14 July 1789)

On the morning of 14 July 1789, the city of Paris was in a state of alarm. The partisans of the Third Estate in France, now under the control of the Bourgeois Militia of Paris (soon to become Revolutionary France's National Guard), had earlier stormed the Hôtel des Invalides without meeting significant opposition.<sup>[25]</sup> Their intention had been to gather the weapons held there (29,000 to 32,000 muskets, but without powder or shot). The commandant at the Invalides had in the previous few days taken the precaution of transferring 250 barrels of gunpowder to the Bastille for safer storage.<sup>[26]</sup>

At this point, the Bastille was nearly empty, housing only seven prisoners:<sup>[27]</sup> four forgers; James F.X. Whyte, a "lunatic" imprisoned at the request of his family; Auguste-Claude Tavernier, who had tried to assassinate Louis XV thirty years before; and one "deviant" aristocrat, the Comte de Solages, imprisoned by his father using a *lettre de cachet* (while the Marquis de Sade had been transferred out ten days earlier).<sup>[26]</sup>

The high cost of maintaining a garrisoned medieval fortress, for what was seen as having a limited purpose, had led to a decision being made shortly before the disturbances began to replace it with an open public space.<sup>[28]</sup> Amid the tensions of July 1789, the building remained as a symbol of royal tyranny.<sup>[29]</sup>

The regular garrison consisted of 82 *invalides* (veteran soldiers no longer suitable for service in the field).<sup>[30]</sup> It had however been reinforced on 7 July by 32 grenadiers of the Swiss Salis-Samade Regiment from the regular troops on the Champ de Mars.<sup>[31]</sup> The walls mounted 18 eight-pound guns and 12 smaller pieces. The governor was Bernard-René de Launay, son of the previous governor and actually born within the Bastille.<sup>[26]</sup>

The official list of *vainqueurs de la Bastille* (conquerors of the Bastille) subsequently compiled has 954 names,<sup>[33]</sup> and the total of the crowd was probably fewer than one thousand. A breakdown of occupations included in the list indicates that the majority were local artisans, together with some regular army deserters and a few distinctive categories, such as 21 wine merchants.<sup>[34]</sup>

The crowd gathered outside the fortress around mid-morning, calling for the pulling back of the seemingly threatening cannon from the embrasures of the towers and walls<sup>[35]</sup> and the release of the arms and gunpowder stored inside.<sup>[26]</sup> Two representatives from the Hotel de Ville (municipal authorities from the Town Hall)<sup>[36]</sup> were invited into the fortress and negotiations began, while another was admitted around noon with definite demands. The negotiations dragged on while the crowd grew and became impatient.<sup>[37]</sup> Around 1:30 pm, the crowd surged into the undefended outer courtyard.<sup>[38]</sup> A small party climbed onto the roof of a building next to the gate to the inner courtyard of the fortress and broke the chains on the drawbridge, crushing one *vainqueur* as it fell. Soldiers of the garrison called to the people to withdraw, but amid the noise and confusion these shouts were misinterpreted as encouragement to enter.<sup>[5]</sup> Gunfire began, apparently spontaneously, turning the crowd into a mob. The crowd seems to have felt that they had been intentionally drawn into a trap and the fighting became more violent and intense, while attempts by deputies to organise a cease-fire were ignored by the attackers.<sup>[5]</sup>

The firing continued, and after 3:00 pm, the attackers were reinforced by mutinous *gardes françaises*, along with two cannons. A substantial force of Royal Army troops encamped on the Champ de Mars did not intervene.<sup>[39]</sup> With the possibility of mutual carnage suddenly apparent, Governor de Launay ordered the garrison to cease firing <sup>[40]</sup>at 5:00 pm. A letter written by de Launay offering surrender but threatening to explode the powder stocks held if the garrison were not permitted to evacuate the fortress unharmed, was handed out to the besiegers through a gap in the inner gate.<sup>[41]</sup> His demands were not met, but Launay nonetheless capitulated, as he realised that with limited food stocks and no water supply<sup>[34]</sup> his troops could not hold out much longer. He accordingly opened the gates, and the *vainqueurs* swept in to take over the fortress at 5:30 pm.<sup>[42]</sup>

Ninety-eight attackers and one defender had died in the actual fighting, a disparity accounted for by the protection provided to the garrison by the fortress walls.<sup>[43]</sup> Launay was seized and dragged towards the Hôtel de Ville in a storm of abuse. Outside the Hôtel, a discussion as to his fate began.<sup>[44]</sup> The badly beaten Launay shouted "Enough! Let me die!"<sup>[45]</sup> and kicked a pastry cook named Dulait in the groin. Launay was then stabbed repeatedly and died. An English traveller, Doctor Edward Rigby, reported what he saw, "[We] perceived two bloody heads raised on pikes, which were said to be the heads of the Marquis de Launay, Governor of the Bastille, and of Monsieur Flesselles, Prévôt des Marchands. It was a chilling and a horrid sight! ... Shocked and disgusted at this scene, [we] retired immediately from the streets."<sup>[46]</sup>

The three officers of the permanent Bastille garrison were also killed by the crowd; surviving police reports detail their wounds and clothing.<sup>[47]</sup>



People in the Castle of Bastille, (Musée de la Révolution française).



An eye witness painting of the siege of the Bastille by Claude Cholat<sup>[A]</sup>



A plan of the Bastille and surrounding buildings made immediately after 1789; the red dot marks the perspective of Claude Cholat's painting of the siege.



Two of the *invalides* of the garrison were lynched, but all but two of the Swiss regulars of the Salis-Samadé Regiment were protected by the French Guards and eventually released to return to their regiment. Their officer, Lieutenant Louis de Flue, wrote a detailed report on the defense of the Bastille, which was incorporated in the logbook of the Salis-Samadé and has survived.<sup>[48]</sup> It is (perhaps unfairly) critical of the dead Marquis de Launay, whom Flue accuses of weak and indecisive leadership.<sup>[48]</sup> The blame for the fall of the Bastille would rather appear to lie with the inertia of the commanders of the 5,000<sup>[49]</sup> Royal Army troops encamped on the Champ de Mars, who did not act when either the nearby Hôtel des Invalides or the Bastille were attacked.<sup>[50]</sup>



Engraving, c. 1789: militia hoisting the heads of Flesselles and the Marquis de Launay on pikes. The caption reads "Thus we take revenge on traitors".



*Sans-culottes* wearing iconic Phrygian caps and tricolor cockades

Returning to the Hôtel de Ville, the mob accused the *prévôt des marchands* (roughly, mayor) Jacques de Flesselles of treachery, and he was assassinated on the way to an ostensible trial at the Palais-Royal.<sup>[51]</sup>

The king first learned of the storming only the next morning through the Duke of La Rochefoucauld. "Is it a revolt?" asked Louis XVI. The duke replied: "No sire, it's not a revolt; it's a revolution."<sup>[52]</sup>

At Versailles, the Assembly remained ignorant of most of the Paris events, but eminently aware that the Marshal de Broglie stood on the brink of unleashing a pro-Royalist coup to force the Assembly to adopt the order of 23 June<sup>[53]</sup> and then to dissolve. Noailles apparently was first to bring reasonably accurate news of the Paris events to Versailles. M. Ganilh and Bancal-des-Issarts, dispatched to the Hôtel de Ville, confirmed his report.<sup>[54]</sup>

By the morning of 15 July, the outcome appeared clear to the king as well, and he and his military commanders backed down.<sup>[55]</sup> The twenty three regiments of Royal troops concentrated around Paris dispersed to their frontier garrisons.<sup>[56]</sup> The Marquis de la Fayette took up command of the National Guard at Paris;<sup>[57]</sup> Jean-Sylvain Bailly – leader of the Third Estate and instigator of the Tennis Court Oath – became the city's mayor under a new governmental structure known as the *Commune de Paris*.<sup>[58]</sup> The king announced that he would recall Necker and return from Versailles to Paris; on 17 July, in Paris, he accepted a tricolor cockade from Bailly and entered the Hôtel de Ville to cries of "Long live the King" and "Long live the Nation".<sup>[59]</sup>

## Aftermath

Nonetheless, after this violence, nobles – little assured by the apparent and, as it was to prove, temporary reconciliation of king and people – started to flee the country as *émigrés*.<sup>[60]</sup> Among the first to leave were the comte d'Artois (the future Charles X of France) and his two sons, the prince de Condé, the prince de Conti, the Polignac family, and (slightly later) Charles Alexandre de Calonne, the former finance minister. They settled at

Turin, where Calonne, as agent for the count d'Artois and the prince de Condé, began plotting civil war within the kingdom and agitating for a European coalition against France.<sup>[61]</sup>

The news of the successful insurrection at Paris spread throughout France. In accord with principles of popular sovereignty and with complete disregard for claims of royal authority, the people established parallel structures of municipalities for civic government and militias for civic protection.<sup>[23]</sup> In rural areas, many went beyond this: some burned title-deeds and no small number of châteaux, as the "Great Fear" spread across the countryside during the weeks of 20 July to 5 August, with attacks on wealthy landlords impelled by the belief that the aristocracy was trying to put down the revolution.<sup>[62][63]</sup>



Arrest of Launay, by Jean-Baptiste Lallemand, 1790, (Musée de la Révolution française)



Arrest of Launay by an unknown artist. An analysis in 2013 of the Bastille's dimensions showed that it did not tower over the neighborhood as depicted in the paintings, but was a comparable height to other buildings in the neighborhood.<sup>[32]</sup>



The Place de la Bastille and the July Column where the Bastille once stood.

On 22 July 1789 the populace lynched Controller-General of Finances Joseph Fouchon de Doué and his son-in-law<sup>[64]</sup> Louis Bénigne François Bertier de Sauvigny. Both held official positions under the monarchy.

Although there were arguments that the Bastille should be preserved as a monument to liberation or as a depot for the new National Guard, the Permanent Committee of Municipal Electors at the Paris Town Hall gave the construction entrepreneur Pierre-François Palloy the commission of disassembling the building.<sup>[65]</sup> Palloy commenced work immediately. The demolition of the fortress itself, the melting down of its clock portraying chained prisoners, and the breaking up of four statues were all carried out within five months.<sup>[66]</sup>

On 16 July 1789, two days after the Storming of the Bastille, John Frederick Sackville, serving as ambassador to France, reported to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Francis Osborne, 5th Duke of Leeds, "Thus, my Lord, the greatest revolution that we know anything of has been effected with, comparatively speaking—if the magnitude of the event is considered—the loss of very few lives. From this moment we may consider France as a free country, the King a very limited monarch, and the nobility as reduced to a level with the rest of the nation."<sup>[67]</sup>

In 1790, Lafayette gave the wrought-iron, one-pound and three-ounce key to the Bastille to U.S. President George Washington. Washington displayed it prominently at government facilities and events in New York and in Philadelphia until shortly before his retirement in 1797. The key remains on display at Washington's residence of Mount Vernon.<sup>[68][69]</sup>

Palloy also took bricks from the Bastille and had them carved into replicas of the fortress, which he sold, along with medals allegedly made from the chains of prisoners. Pieces of stone from the structure were sent to every district in France, and some have been located. Various other pieces of the Bastille also survive, including stones used to build the Pont de la Concorde bridge over the Seine, and one of the towers, which was found buried in 1899 and is now at Square Henri-Galli in Paris, as well as the clock bells and pulley system, which are now in the Musée d'Art Campanaire.<sup>[70]</sup> About 900 people who claimed to have stormed the Bastille received certificates (*Brevet de vainqueur de la Bastille*) from the National Assembly in 1790, and a number of these still exist.<sup>[71]</sup> The building itself is outlined in brick on the location where it once stood, as is the moat in the Paris Metro stop below it, where a piece of the foundation is also on display.

## Notes

- A. Claude Cholat was a **wine merchant** living in Paris on the rue Noyer at the start of 1789. Cholat fought on the side of the Revolutionaries during the storming of the Bastille, manning one of their cannon during the battle. Afterwards, Cholat produced a famous amateur **gouache** painting showing the events of the day; produced in primitive, naïve style, it combines all the events of the day into a single graphical representation.<sup>[24]</sup>

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- *This article incorporates text from the public domain History of the French Revolution from 1789 to 1814* (<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9602>), by *François Mignet* (1824), as made available by *Project Gutenberg*.

## Further reading

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## External links

Media related to Storming of the Bastille at Wikimedia Commons

- Place de la Bastille (<http://uk.france.fr/en/discover/place-de-la-bastille>) – official French website (in English)
- Thomas Jefferson's letter to John Jay recounting the storming of the Bastille (<http://www.footnote.com/spotlight/174/thomas-jeffersons-accoun>)

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