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HNR 499

The Importance of the Réveillon Riots in the French Revolution

The storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, is considered the beginning of the French Revolution. Historians over many years have placed significant emphasis on its symbolic nature and as the beginning of the violence that characterizes the French Revolution. Over time there became more focus on the Revolutionary crowd and its impact, yet this was mainly within the context of the storming of the Bastille. However, newer literature is beginning to put more emphasis on events that occurred before the Bastille was taken. In particular, the Réveillon Riots, a series of four riots that took place April 23-28, 1789, have been highlighted by a number of works in the past several years. These riots were part of a process that developed and increased the violence of the crowd. The Réveillon Riots were a significant event in the evolution of the Revolutionary crowd that led to the storming of the Bastille.

The Réveillon Riots were a small issue that turned into a violent problem. The quandary began on April 23, 1789, when Jean-Baptiste Réveillon, a fairly wealthy non-Noble and owner of a prominent wallpaper manufacturing company, was heard lamenting the times in which fifteen sous a day was plenty for a man to live on. From this a rumor spread that he had called for a reduction in wages to 15 sous a day, and that the amount would be plenty for his workers though bread cost 14 ½ sous at the time. His innocent comment was perceived by the people of Paris as another example of the wealthy populous that did not or chose not to understand or care about the needs of the working class; the crowds of Paris chose to protest this injustice. With the

first few demonstrations the authorities were present but did not intervene because the protest was peaceful. At that time, the guards were still willing to use force to subvert the mob, and the mob maintained order because of it. Also, the crowd did not feel the need to begin with a violent reaction when the main purpose was to make a statement against those who wished to oppress them, either by taking away privileges or lowering wages. The fourth protest in the Réveillon Riots began much like first three nonviolent protests. On April 27, 1789 it started as nothing more than another demonstration; the crowd that had gathered went to Réveillon's house – he was hiding in Henriot's house next door – where Réveillon's personal guard was standing watch over the house and the surrounding buildings. When the protesters discovered Réveillon's hiding place they overran the soldiers to search and pillaged the houses. Most of the soldiers did nothing; it was not until the French Guard came that anyone fired upon the crowd at all. In the struggle 100 demonstrators were killed and many more were injured. This might have discouraged the crowd enough to stand down, but the next day two of the protesters were sentenced to die by the Parlement of Paris, a decision that was popular with those in power. The enraged crowd returned the next day with larger numbers, but this time they proceeded to throw things at the troops, barricade attempted troop interventions, and even directly attacked the soldiers; both Réveillon's house and factory were ransacked.¹ Like the storming of the Bastille, this was an event that started out peacefully and ended in extreme violence only after further oppression of the working class people and their demands.

An early interpretation of the French Revolution comes from Alexis de Tocqueville in *The Old Regime and the Revolution* which is an unfinished work interrupted by his death in

¹ Micah Alpaugh, *The politics of escalation in French Revolutionary protest: political demonstrations, non-violence and violence in the grandes journées of 1789 French History*, French History (2009):23.3, 340-348, <http://fh.oxfordjournals.org/content/23/3/336.abstract> (accessed March 3, 2011).

1859. Since he was only one generation removed from the French Revolution, he chose to rely on primary sources to form his own opinions. As a classical liberal he believed in limited government and the freedom of individuals. He examined the events of the French Revolution mainly from a political standpoint; he often examined how events affected the Court and Assembly, and occasionally involved what others had said about the subject. Tocqueville recalled that many pamphlets, usually political in nature and used as propaganda, presented a distorted view of what was going on in the beginning of the French Revolution. The political pamphlets presented the people of France as happy and supportive of the monarchy which Tocqueville notes was not the case. The literature even went as far as to present Launay, the Governor of the Bastille, in a positive light. Tocqueville added that he felt Launay's fate, his execution and mutilation, was deserved.² This interpretation emphasizes Tocqueville's political views and is evidence of his dislike of Old Regime leaders, a symbol of large government. Though he gives a substantial weight to the influence of the working class, Tocqueville does not mention the Réveillon Riots and cites mainly political reasons, like the dismissal of Necker, as the fire for the storming of the Bastille. He does, however, note significant changes brought about by the storming of the Bastille that signify the way the crowd had changed the city of Paris, such as the revolt of the armed forces and the rule of the people of Paris, rather than the rule of the king or aristocracy, but does not talk about the crowd itself much.³ The lack of military control and the increase of the people's control are both key changes that the Réveillon Riots helped bring about. The Riots, in a way, began the rule and influence of the workers and forewarned France that the workers' opinions would be heard, if not through protests then through violence.

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, ed. Francois Furet, Francois Melonio (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 137

³ Tocqueville, *Old Regime*, 135

As Marxism became popular, historians such as Georges Lefebvre began to focus more on the influence of the Revolutionary crowd. As one of the earlier Marxist historians, Lefebvre paved the way for many others to study the importance of the working class crowd in the French Revolution like he did in his *The Coming of the French Revolution* in 1947. He mentioned the Réveillon Riots in passing, and instead called more attention to other, more frequent riots that involved the sacking grain storage facilities for food or intimidating community authorities to prevent having to pay for amenities. Yet, he referred to the Réveillon Riots as a “terrifying riot put down by musket fire and executions.”⁴ Lefebvre chose to emphasize the violence perpetrated by the soldiers of the Riots rather than the violence of the crowd which affirms his influences. Unlike many historians Lefebvre discussed the view of the crowds in addition to the more traditional view of those in power. He identified differences in their perceptions and the conflicts the differences caused. Yet, as before, he most often sympathized with the crowd, he even called their sacking of the Bastille “heroic tenacity.”⁵ Lefebvre did tap into some of the importance of the Réveillon Riots. He acknowledged the horrific violence in the Réveillon Riots more so than in the other uprisings over grain and amenities. This is one of the characteristics that made the Réveillon Riots significant. The violence that took place during this particular incident was divergent from other protests of its kind, it was also indicative of the violence that would take place in the storming of the Bastille. Though Lefebvre’s Marxism influences his interpretations, another Marxist, George Rudé, has a more detail focused interpretation.

George Rudé used detail to give a different interpretation of the conflicting views of the revolution. Also a Marxist, even citing one of Lefebvre’s works, Rudé paid more specific

⁴ Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 105

⁵ Lefebvre, *Coming*, 114

attention to the crowd during the Revolution particularly in *The Crowd in the French Revolution* in 1959. He used more specific personal accounts as primary sources and compared different points of view in order to establish a factual account of different revolutionary events. For example: when discussing the Réveillon Riots, Rudé considered a report sent by the lieutenant of police in Paris, Thiroux de Crosne, to the King:

«Il y a eu hier soir sur les dix heures [he wrote] un peu de rumeur dans un canton du faubourg St. Antoine ; il n'était que l'effet du mécontentement que quelques ouvriers marquaient contre deux entrepreneurs de manufacture qui, dans l'assemblée de Ste. Marguerite, avaient fait des observations inconsidérées sur le taux des salaires. »⁶

As Crosne said, the entire series of Riots began with a rumored wage dispute. He later reported on the extended protests as well; Rudé used Crosne's reports to construct much of his own accounts of the Réveillon Riots. Later Rudé used Crosne's report to refute the account of J. Collot who said that the main force of the crowd was from Saint-Marcel instead of Saint-Antoine as Thiroux de Crosne had said, in addition to the reports from the commissioners of the Châtelet.⁷ Through cross examining evidence, Rudé came to what he believed was the truth and used it to compile his factual account of the Réveillon Riots. He also used this technique to dispel myths concerning the Revolution. Rudé used different methods of analysis including political and social analysis in order to gain a broad scope of the involvement of the crowd in the French Revolution. Though he looked more in depth at the Réveillon Riots than those before him and stressed the importance of the crowd in the French Revolution, there were still no explicit connections between the Riots and the storming of the Bastille.

⁶Arch. Nat., F¹² 1430 as quoted in George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961),

⁷ Rudé, *The Crowd*, 35-38.

Alfred Cobban, as a reaction to the Marxist interpretations by historians such as Lefebvre and Rudé, chose to reevaluate and revise the current interpretations. Instead of focusing on the crowd in *A History of Modern France* in 1961, he briefly mentioned the events of the Réveillon Riots but focused on the members of the upper class that were spared from the crowds wrath, such as one of the few Nobles popular with the crowd, the Duc d'Orleans. He looked more so at how the actions of the crowds were indicative of political turmoil and how the political situation affected what was going on in France and in Paris specifically. Though he merely recounted the basic facts of the storming of the Bastille, he pointed out that it was the moment the rulers of France had lost their hold on the city of Paris. As a reaction to his Marxist counterparts, he used mostly political analysis, and focused more on the reactions of the Court than that of the people. He did not examine the impact of the crowds, but did realize that after the Bastille, power had changed hands. The storming of the Bastille is almost noted more as a regime change; Cobban ignored much of the crowds' activities in favor of studying the people in political power rather than the people of Paris that gained power by taking it. The crowd had taken over Paris and was now a force to be reckoned with. Though different than those before him, on the 200 year anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, many historians sought to reexamine older works even more.

Later historians have had more opportunity to look at the work of others. William Doyle used political and social historical analysis to examine the transformation that took place within the Revolution in *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* in 1989. He used both primary sources and the works of others to examine events. During his recount of the events that led to the storming of the Bastille, he quoted Nicolas Ruault in his *Gazette d'un Parisien sous la Révolution* who spoke of the failure of forming the citizens' militia in controlling the crowd.

Ruault admitted that "...we made a sorry showing; we could not contain the people's fury; if we had gone too far, they would have exterminated us. It is not the moment to reason with them."⁸

Doyle used this quote in the context of others' accounts of the events leading up to the Bastille to emphasize the growing fear of the people of Paris in regards to the crowd. Though he did not mention the Réveillon Riots in depth, he did see that events before the storming of the Bastille gave evidence of trouble. Like Tocqueville and Lefebvre, though Doyle did not pay much attention to events before the Bastille, he recognized that the Parisian crowd was increasingly dangerous and uncontrollable. However, not all historians of this time used Doyle approach of examination.

Another historian of the time, Simon Schama, used narrative and the stories of particular people involved in the Revolution to examine what happened in his own 1989 work, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*. In that respect, he put more emphasis on Réveillon himself than the riots his remark caused but still identified the Réveillon Riots as "an unmistakable sign of things to come."⁹ So though, like many historians before him, he did not connect the Riots directly to the storming of the Bastille, he recognized it as a step in the evolution of the Revolutionary crowd. He did this later when describing the arming of the people before the storming of the Bastille by telling the story of Camille Desmoulins who encouraged the crowd to gather weapons to fight for their freedom.¹⁰ He portrayed leaders in the Revolution often as controllers of the masses unlike Doyle who pointed out that the so called leaders were fearful of the unpredictable crowd. This analysis of individuals created a story of the Revolution that showed the complex political battles that wove through the social issues of the Revolution.

⁸ Nicolas Ruault, *Gazette d'un Parisien sous la Révolution*, 154 as quoted in William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 24

⁹ Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1989) 330.

¹⁰ Schama, *Citizens*, 388-389.

Unlike Doyle and Schama, some historians chose to attempt to eliminate a certain bias on the French Revolution.

Olivier Bernier strove to examine societal, economic, social and political causes with as little bias as possible in his telling of the French Revolution, *Words of Fire, Deeds of Blood*, in 1989. He does this largely by examining the works of others and forming them into a comprehensive version of events. Unlike Doyle and Schama who sought to create their own, new interpretation of the events of the Revolution, Bernier made it clear that his goal was less interpretation in favor of a more complete account of both the political and social events that occurred. Though it was not specifically focused on, Bernier did show the progression of the mob which started as, quoted by an older historian, Mousset, “an ill-defined, unsure, inchoate mass, without real leaders, without real goals...”¹¹ Yet after the storming of the Bastille, Bernier noted that “The mob had progressed from the sacking of a house to murder.”¹² It was this moment that changed France forever. Bernier showed that the crowd that sacked the Bastille did not just sporadically occur; to the contrary it was the result of other events. Though, like many others, Bernier lacked direct comparison between the Réveillon Riots and the Bastille he was one of the few historians to even mention them in the same thought which implies that they could be related. Through the use of the works of others, Bernier was able to connect the violence of the Réveillon Riots to that of the Bastille.

Though many sources over the course of many years mention the Réveillon Riots the Riots tend to be portrayed as just one of the many instances of a violent crowd in the French Revolution, nothing out of the ordinary. Many sources largely fail to take into account the

¹¹ Albert Mousset, *Un témoin ignore de la Révolution, le comte de Fernan Nuñez*, (Paris, 1923) as quoted by Oliver Bernier, *Words of Fire, Deeds of Blood*, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1989), 16

¹² Bernier, *Words of Fire*, 25

significance the Riots had at that point in time. Violence, though very normal for the latter part of the French Revolution, had not yet become characteristic of the changing political climate and the opinions of the working class did not yet carry much weight. These are all things the Réveillon Riots changed. Some later works that more specifically focus on the Réveillon Riots address some of these issues. Micah Alpaugh's 2009 article, *The Politics of Escalation in French Revolutionary Protest: Political Demonstrations, Non-violence and Violence in the Grandes Journées of 1789*, is an account of the Réveillon Riots and other demonstrations in the first part of the Revolution. In this article Alpaugh looks at a number of events that occurred before and during the Revolution to explain how protests were present in many stages of the Revolution. A key factor of these protests was the lack of violent intent in the beginnings of a number of different protests that began peacefully and ended in bloodshed. He argues that many of the protests were political, rather than social, in nature, and that many other historians are overemphasizing the violent aspects and class struggles in the Revolution rather than giving proper due to the non-violent beginnings of the political protests. He uses a combination of primary sources and well-known secondary sources to create a firm foundation in which to reexamine what happened in the beginning of the French Revolution. He looks at the early demonstrations from both a social and political historical perspective and demonstrates how the social causes widely accepted by other authors to be the main factors were actually a result of the political atmosphere. Alpaugh reexamines the view of the crowd and concludes that their actions were politically motivated and that the tradition of political demonstrations had more to do with the Réveillon Riots than the social causes.¹³ As Alpaugh writes, in April of 1789 there had not been much violence yet. After looking at memoirs written by people involved, he discovered

¹³ Micah Alpaugh, *The politics of escalation in the French Revolutionary protest: political demonstrations, non-violence and violence in the grandes journées of 1789*, *French History*

that before the Riots there were regular demonstrations frequently which stemmed from the tradition of religious processions. In fact, Alpaugh argues that the uses of political demonstrations in the early stages of the Revolution have been overlooked and some incidents, such as the Réveillon Riots, began without any intention of violence. He says that “Even the early stages of the fall of the Bastille suggest that protesters did not expect the event to descend into bloodshed...”¹⁴ So the Réveillon Riots and the Bastille are connected in that they both started as nonviolent events. The Riots were simply political protests that had occurred many times before without leading to violence. Those leading the raid on the Bastille simply intended on pressuring Launay to surrender the fortress, it was clear that neither party wanted bloodshed. However, both instances led to horrible violence for similar reasons.

In both the Réveillon Riots and the storming of the Bastille the crowd in Paris took drastic action in order to defend their rights. Many historians note the violence in the Réveillon Riots but focus on the violence and change that was present in the sacking of the Bastille. As time went on, particularly with the addition of the Marxist historians, the crowd of the French Revolution came more into view. More recently, the Réveillon Riots have been studied specifically, giving more credit to the events before the storming of the Bastille that also helped shape the Revolution and its crowd. Though overlooked in importance by many historians, the Réveillon Riots took a great part in turning the once peaceful people of Paris into the crowd that would storm the Bastille. It is in studying these early events that the reasoning and escalation behind the storming of the Bastille and ultimately the French Revolution come into focus.

¹⁴ Alpaugh, *The politics of escalation*, 353