



# French Revolution: The Fall of the Bastille

## The Truth Behind the Myth

The fall of the Bastille is the iconic basis for Republican France and symbolic of the press for Liberty, Fraternity and Equality; the rallying cry of the French and subsequent revolutions. A study of the actual proceedings of the 14<sup>th</sup> July, 1789 would suggest that the symbol was constructed from whole cloth. It is claimed that the Bastille represented the tyranny and the despotic oppression of the *Ancien Regime* and yet on that fateful day there were only 7 prisoners in that mighty fortress; 4 forgers, 2 lunatics and an aristocrat imprisoned for deviancy. None of them were leaders of the people, advocates of human rights or particularly nice. The reason for the attack lay in their preceding actions. The Bastille was the mob's third stop of the day. The turmoil had been initiated outside the Hotel de Ville by the 'call to arms'. To a mob intent on looting as much as political revolution, this seemed an excellent idea and they promptly went to the Hotel des Invalides where they broke in and took 30,000 muskets from the armory there.

Eyewitness accounts are notoriously unreliable in terms of crowd size but it seems there were about 1000 involved in this. One question never answered was how 30,000 guns were distributed amongst 1000 people. Having armed themselves they now needed ammunition, which was stored at the Bastille. And so, for the first time, that was where the mob's attention lay. Later reports assert that they went there because of a rumor that the cannon had been directed at the streets of Paris to ensure the peace. This was not so and one look would have told them this fact. Two representatives went in to negotiate with the governor. The Bastille was manned by 82 veteran soldiers who were pensioned off as unfit for duty, they also had 32 Swiss Guards. The governor, de Launay, who was actually born in the Bastille, did not want trouble and met with the negotiators to discuss their demands; surrender, the arms and ammunition and the removal of the cannon. Time dragged on and the crowd grew and became restless. By the early afternoon they had entered the undefended courtyard and cut the ropes of the drawbridge.

Milling around and increasingly impatient a rumor started that this was a trap (as they had put themselves in the situation the logic is opaque to say the least), panic ensued and a shot was fired; no-one knows by whom. As so often happens, everybody started firing, the mob having been joined by deserters from the French Guards. In the ensuing melee 98 attackers died (and one defender) before de Launay ordered a ceasefire in an attempt to avoid a massacre. Terms were offered and refused by the mob so the governor, mainly to avoid further bloodshed and thinking it would appease the mob, surrendered. The unruly crowd then poured into the fortress in search of loot while poor de Launay was stabbed to death, decapitated and his head paraded through the streets. It was then that the symbolism and mythologizing began. An entrepreneur, Pierre-Francois Palloy, secured demolition rights and sold much of the rubble as souvenirs, becoming rich from the chaotic events.

Sources: Mignet, Francois-Auguste (20

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That was an awesome article, it really helped me a lot. So thank you it had great detail and it helped do my research.