

The Storming of the Bastille

The siege of Paris' Bastille prison and its subsequent destruction has become, over time, the pivotal moment of the French Revolution – so much so that the French now celebrate Bastille Day (July 14th) as their national day. **The storming of the Bastille invokes a powerful image of an aggrieved people, once powerless, now rising up to destroy one of the agents of their oppression.**

The reality of the Bastille story is somewhat more mundane. The fortress was certainly in use as a prison throughout the 1700s but it never held more than 40 captives at any given time. While it's true that the few who were incarcerated were political prisoners (**trouble-making aristocrats, seditious journalists and others held by royal warrants or lettres de cachet**) their sentences were usually short, rarely longer than a year or two.

By the late 1780s the Bastille held very few prisoners and was more in use as a storehouse for weapons and munitions. At the time of its storming, orders had actually been given for its closure, though the crowd was not aware of this.

“Nothing is more terrible than the events at Paris between 12th and 15th July... cannon and armed force used against the Bastille... the Estates declaring the King's ministers and the civil and military authorities to be responsible to the nation; and the King going on foot, without escort, to the Assembly, almost to apologise... **this is how weakness, uncertainty and an imprudent violence will overturn the throne of Louis XVI.**”
King Gustav of Sweden, 1789

What contributed to the July 14, 1789 attack on the Bastille was the king's decision, two days earlier, to dismiss Necker from the office of finance minister. The Paris crowd, angry about the removal of their 'champion' and fearful that the

Three Different Interpretations of the Storming of the Bastille:



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army was about to lead a royalist counter-revolution against the National Assembly, began to search eagerly for weapons to defend themselves. **Knowing that the Bastille served as an armoury**, they soon turned their attentions to it. A crowd gathered around its walls and pleaded with the Bastille's governor, de Launay, to surrender its contents; he vehemently refused. Two detachments from the newly-formed militia and hundreds of civilians forced their way into the prison and, although more than a hundred were killed, the Bastille was eventually captured.

Late in the afternoon, de Launay was seized by the angry mob and beaten incessantly. During the struggle he lashed out and kicked one of his assailants, a baker named Desnot, in the groin. **As a result de Launay was stabbed, his head hacked off with a bread knife and his body dismembered, his head skewered on a pike and carried through the streets of Paris.** Several other members of the Bastille garrison were also murdered, while approximately **30,000 pounds of gunpowder fell into the hands of the crowd.** **There was just seven prisoners inside the Bastille and they were all liberated by the invading mob**, although some reports suggest that they went reluctantly, perhaps suggesting that detention in the Bastille wasn't as vile as was portrayed. After the building had been thoroughly looted, a demolition gang moved in to surround the Bastille on July 15. An order was made by the Commune to dismantle it, the work being completed by November 1789.