

A British Observer of the September Massacres

« [3 September 1792] . . . a courier arrived here yesterday afternoon with an account that the Prussians were some leagues on this side [of] Verdun. Immediately on receiving this intelligence the Legislative Assembly decreed that as universal an alarm as possible should be spread through the whole country in order that no time might be lost in preparing for the general defence; in consequence however of the fermentation excited in Paris by the sounding the Tocsin, firing the alarm guns and beating to arms, the people assembled in different parts of the town in a very tumultuous manner, and at about seven o'clock in the evening surrounded the church called l'Eglise des Carmes, where about 160 Priests *non sermentés*, and taken into custody since the 10th, were confined. These unfortunate people fell victims to the fury of the enraged populace and were massacred with circumstances of barbarity too shocking to describe. The mob went afterwards to the prison of the Abbaye, and having demanded of the jailors a list of the prisoners they put aside such as were confined only for debt, and pulled to pieces most of the others. The same cruelties were committed during the night and continue this morning in all the other prisons of the town. When they have satiated their vengeance, which is principally directed against the refractory Priests, . . . it is to be hoped the tumult will subside, but as the multitude are perfectly masters, everything is to be dreaded. The Assembly deputed some of its most popular and most eloquent members to endeavour to bring the people to reason and a sense of their duty. These gentlemen escaped being insulted but were not listened to. The Royal Family were all safe and well late last night. It is impossible to describe to your Lordship the confusion and consternation which at present prevails here. The Prussians are advancing rapidly, they have already cut off the communication between the armies of Messrs Luckner and Dumouriez; and intelligence is just arrived that a detachment of 2000 men lately sent from hence to reinforce Verdun is fallen into the enemy's hands.

[4 September 1792] About one o'clock on Sunday forenoon three signal guns were fired, the Tocsin was rung, and one of the Municipality on horseback proclaimed in different parts of the city, that the enemy was at the gates, Verdun was besieged, and could only hold out a few days. The inhabitants were therefore ordered to assemble in their respective sections, and from thence to march to the Champ de Mars, where they were to select an army of sixty thousand men. The first part of this proclamation was put in execution, but the second was totally neglected. . . . A party at the instigation of some one or other declared they would not quit Paris, as long as the prisons were filled with Traitors (for they called those so, that were confined in the different Prisons and Churches), who might in the absence of such a number of Citizens rise and not only effect the release of His Majesty, but make an entire counterrevolution. To prevent this, a large body of *sans-culottes* . . . proceeded to the Church de Carmes, rue de Vaugirard, where amidst the acclamations of a savage mob they massacred a number of refractory Priests, all the Vicaires de Saint Sulpice, the directors of the Seminaries, and the Doctors of the Sorbonne, with the *ci-devant* Archbishop of Arles, and a number of others, exceeding in all one hundred and seventy. . . .

Many of the Municipality attended at the different prisons, and endeavoured to quell the fury of the people, but all in vain; they therefore proposed to the mob a plan of establishing a kind of Court of justice in the prisons, for the immediate trial of the remaining offenders. They caught at this, and two of the Municipality with a detachment of the mob, about two on Monday morning, began this strange Court of justice. The gaoler's list was called for, those that were confined for forging assignats, or theft, with the unhappy people that were any way suspected to be concerned in the affair of the 10th, were in general massacred; this form took place in nearly all the prisons in Paris. But early on Monday morning a detachment with seven pieces of cannon went to attack the Bicetre. It is reported that these wretches charged their cannon with small stones and such other things, and fired promiscuously among the prisoners. I cannot however vouch for this, they have however not finished their cruelties there yet, and it is now past six o'clock Tuesday evening. To be convinced of what I could not believe, I made a visit to the prison of the Abbaye about seven o'clock on Monday evening, for the slaughter had not ceased. . . . Two of the Municipality were then in the prison with some of the mob distributing their justice. Those they found guilty were seemingly released, but only to be precipitated by the door on a number of piques, and then among the savage cries of *vive la nation*, to be hacked to pieces by those that had swords and were ready to receive them. After this their dead bodies were dragged by the arms or legs to the Abbaye, which is distant from the prison about two hundred yards; here they were laid up in heaps till carts could carry them away. The kennel was swimming with blood, and a bloody track was traced from the prison to the Abbaye door where they had dragged these unfortunate people.

I was fortunate enough to be present when five men were acquitted. Such a circumstance, a by-stander told me, had not happened in the operations of this horrid tribunal; and these inconsistent murderers seemed nearly as much pleased at the acquittal of a prisoner as they were at his condemnation. The

same congratulations attended the others that were acquitted and the same those that were condemned. Nothing can exceed the inconsistency of these people. After the general massacre of Sunday night many of the dead bodies were laid on the Pont-neuf to be claimed, a person in the action of stealing a handkerchief from one of the corpses was hacked to pieces on the spot, by the same people who had been guilty of so much cruelty and injustice. »

Source: Oscar Browning, ed., *The Despatches of Earl Gower* (Cambridge University Press, 1885), 213–16, 219–21, 223–28.