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The Perpetrators and Innocents among Revolutionaries

The background of the three women interviewed in “Women Testify Concerning Their Participation in the October Days (1789)” do not belong to revolutionary leaders. They are ordinary, working-class citizens – a cleaning woman, a seamstress, and a lace-worker, early-adults to middle-aged women – forced to join this march by a group of other women, whose purpose was, supposedly, “to ask for bread at Versailles.” These depositions come from an investigation into the October Days, and these examples demonstrate clearly that the majority of the revolt are unassuming commoners led by a few radical leaders.

The detail of being forced into the march is identical for the three accounts, and likely for many other women, for they were forced, in the words of Mrs. Glain and Mrs. Delaissement, “as many other women were,” and, according to Ms. Barre, by reason of “not being able to resist this great number of women” – a clear display of the persuasive power of the masses, even unarmed.

There’s a superficial reiteration of the phrase “to ask for bread” – it appears once in Mrs. Glain’s deposition, and is used by the protesters several times in Ms. Barre’s deposition, first to her, then to the duc de Guiche, then to M. de Saint Priest, and then to King Louis XVI. It was a simple and virtuous claim that attracted the hundreds of women and gained them audience to the National Assembly and to the king; and the king, knowing the importance of feeding his citizens, delivers a response that is, in Ms. Barre’s deposition, interpreted to be a genuine willingness to help, to which the women exclaim in joy, “vive Le Roi!” This cry also signifies that those exclaiming women do not direct their anger irrationally towards the king.

But what appears to be a good-natured plea for bread is blackened in Mrs. Delaissement’s deposition, with protestors initially armed for a violent encounter with makeshift weaponry. She notices Maillard, one of the prominent National Guardsmen to storm the Bastille in the infamously bloody conflict only three months earlier, and who surely knows about the potential for violence from such a protest. There are also fiery individuals, such as the prostitute who states she was “going to Versailles to bring back the queen’s head,” and later physically confronted a Royal Guardsman. While Mrs. Glain’s deposition stated that this protestor was “sharply reproached” for her death threat to the queen, she wasn’t alone – the queen narrowly escaped when the protestors aimed to capture and kill her in the palace upon their arrival.

There is also the animosity against the Royal Guards. The Flanders soldier warns Mrs. Delaissement of the Royal Guards, “who, during a meal, had trampled the

national cockade," a symbol of the National Guard and of the revolution. Mrs. Glain reports that the crowd kills and beheads two Royal Guardsmen. This happens after the king had agreed to the women's requests for bread security, so it was not a necessary action for the women to get into the palace to deliver their message to the king, nor was decapitation after their deaths a protective measure; thus suggests an ulterior motive for the march to Versailles.

Under the guise of asking for bread, the Women's March was a multifaceted success. Not only did it achieve royal protection for Parisian bread supplies, but the women were able to intimidate the Royal Guards, almost murder the queen, and relocate the monarch to Paris. The latter two motives aren't even recognized by the three women, who are only exposed to the former.

This major event in the Revolution foreshadows a great deal of the radicalization to come in the French Revolution. Unlike the storming of the Bastille earlier in the year, which was carried out by a militia force, these are ordinary citizens. (And not only ordinary citizens - working class *women*.) The fact that ordinary women could persuade the king and kill soldiers was surely an inspiring feat and a demonstration of the strength of the mob against authority.

This isn't to say that the whole population mobilized towards revolution. Many of the mob storming Versailles, such as the three women of focus, were relatively innocent in that they only wanted fairer prices for bread and were coerced into joining the march - mobilization of innocent, working-class citizens towards some common goal allows them to achieve greater political goals. Like the rise of the bourgeois class and industrialization, a few French revolutionaries were trying to enact change at such a rate that they themselves are surprised by the extent of the effects, foreshadowing a higher level of radicalism such as that that would appear in the Reign of Terror.

Works Cited

"Women Testify Concerning Their Participation in the October Days (1789)," *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, accessed October 7, 2019, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/474>.