A Time of Violence

The Bastille

One of the ways the French monarchs ensured their power was to protect Paris. They spent a lot of money and effort building fortresses on the outskirts of town. One of those was The Bastille Saint-Antoine. It was originally built to safeguard the eastern border of Paris from the English during the Hundred Years’ War (1337–1453). It was a monstrous fortress with eight towers, designed as an imposing deterrence to keep others out, and was not used as a prison until the reign of King Louis XIII.

Louis XIV imprisoned many opponents in the Bastille. Because of this, the prison became symbolic of the excess nature of the French monarchy. In July 1789, mobs stormed the Bastille and took control of it. The revolutionary government ultimately destroyed the fortress. The site where the Bastille once stood is today called the Place de la Bastille. There, a large columnar statue commemorates a revolution that occurred in 1830. There is no memorial for the storming of the Bastille, a crucial moment in the history of the French Revolution. But the spirit of revolt lives on within that historical spot, and political protests to this day take place on its hallowed grounds.

All was not lost during the destruction of the Bastille. Cobblestones still outline what were the remaining walls of the Bastille. While excavating the tunnels for the Paris Metro system, remains of one of the towers was discovered. Other remains of the fortress, left undisturbed, can be seen nearby.

The Storming of the Bastille

July 14, 1789, was a turning point in the French Revolution, and a symbolic event in European history. It demonstrated that a force of people could challenge a monarchy and overpower it.

The six months leading up to July 14 was a period of ever-increasing turmoil. The Third Estate demanded the formation of a national assembly and the creation of a new constitution. The working class in Paris were facing really tough times. The high prices of bread left them hungry; the decrease in jobs left them poor. King Louis XVI ordered troops stationed at critical locations, and this caused a sense of fear and suspicion amongst the Parisians. Then, on July 11, the king fired his popular finance minister, Jacques Necker. The crowds in Paris gathered, fueling each other with hatred for the king and his actions. On July 12, they marched to the Tuileries to demand Necker’s reinstatement. Guards and militia were ordered to remove the crowd and they did so, though many soldiers broke rank and joined the angry mob. The people of Paris proceeded to loot the city, gathering guns as they destroyed everything they could. But they didn’t stop there—they knew they had to take control of the symbol of defense in Paris: the Bastille.

On the morning of July 14, 1789, several thousand Parisians marched to the Bastille. They made demands on the prison governor, the Marquis de Launay, to release the arms and ammunition stored there. De Launay refused—he had had orders to defend the fortress at all costs. As such, he gave orders to his soldiers to fire on any invaders.

Later in the afternoon, a small group of Parisians was able to gain access to the Bastille courtyard. Guards fired upon them. The crowds outside heard the report, and they stormed the Bastille. A bloody battle ensued for several hours. De Launay finally surrendered that evening. He was taken prisoner by the leaders of the mob and later killed.