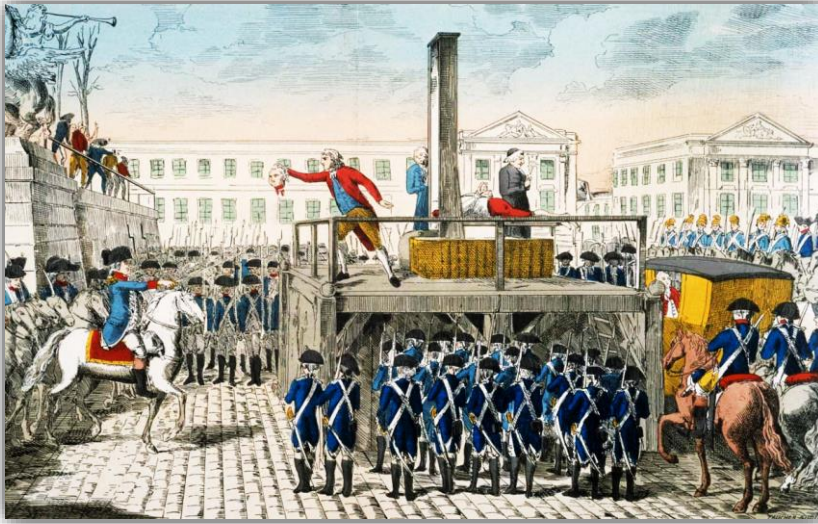


# Facing the Terror: a Witness to the French Revolution

The recently discovered chronicle of an opinionated, elderly aristocrat provides a vivid portrayal of Paris during the most febrile days of the French Revolution.

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*The Execution of Louis XVI, 1793, 18th-century coloured engraving © akg-images.*

*The people are being encouraged to hate and despise us. All the Paris sections are demanding our arrest, and our destruction. Not a day goes by without newspapers carrying reports of sentences carried out against us. We can truly say, terror is riding pillion behind us.*

This striking statement is taken from a hitherto unknown account of life in Paris during the revolutionary Terror. It comes from the pen of an aristocrat – Innocente-Catherine de Rougé du Plessis-Bellière, the octogenarian Dowager Duchess d’Elbeuf – whose existence has not troubled historians hitherto. She spent the period from 1792 to 1794 in her private mansion, the Hôtel d’Elbeuf, in the heart of Paris on the Place du Carrousel – just slightly to the west of where I.M. Pei’s Louvre glass pyramid is located – across the square from the now demolished Tuileries Palace, which housed the National Convention and its committees.

It was to the Hôtel d’Elbeuf that, on 14 January 1794, a delegation from the surveillance committees of the Tuileries and Montagne sections of Paris came calling. They were there to place its owner under arrest, following a denunciation they had received. It was claimed that ‘the Delbeuf woman’ had forced her liveried servants to wear mourning on the death of the Holy Roman Emperor Leopold II in March 1792, at a point when Austria was on the brink of war with France. She was, the denunciation stated, a relative of the emperor; most of her relations had emigrated; and it could be assumed that she was sending them money and corresponding with them. These charges were serious: transferring capital out of France and corresponding with émigrés were capital offences. In the event, the delegation was merciful and, in consideration of her age, they allowed the 86-year-old former duchess to remain in her home but impounded her papers.

## Top of the pyramid

The revolutionary police had in their hands a woman who under the *ancien régime* had occupied a place at the top of its pyramid of wealth and status. She had risen to this elevated position more by luck than judgement. Originally from a respectable sword noble family in Brittany, the Rougés, d’Elbeuf had been promoted to dizzying heights by a series of unanticipated inheritances and two advantageous marriages. By 1789 her income placed her high on the list of the country’s 200 richest families. In marrying the Duc d’Elbeuf (her second marriage) she entered the Lorraine house and ranked as a *princesse étrangère*, just one rung down the ladder from the princes of the royal family. It meant that Marie-Antoinette, as well as the Holy Roman Emperor, were now her relatives.

The charges of the revolutionary authorities against the duchess were not followed up. Although her case reached the highest governmental level, the duchess died in her bed a month after her denunciation and before further action could be taken. Her papers were inventoried, commented upon briefly and then placed in police files and promptly forgotten. They have lain buried in police dossiers in the Archives Nationales, now in Pierrefitte in the northern suburbs of Paris.



*Letters of the Duchess d'Elbeuf, Archives Nationales, Paris. Photograph by Simon Macdonald. Archives nationales, Paris / F7 4775/1. Photograph by Simon Macdonald*

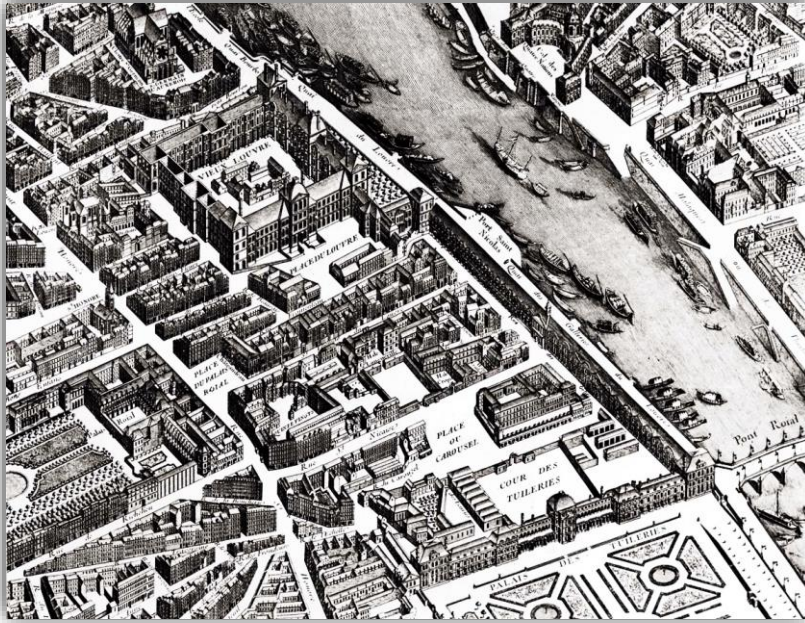
Once police clerks had started sifting the duchess' papers, they were astonished to find what seemed to be a set of copies of letters with an unknown female friend with whom the duchess had been corresponding for some 55 years, since 1738. Tantalisingly, the police authorities were not interested in the *ancien régime* and had no compunction in consigning to the dustbin the first 50 years of the letters. But they left – and thus made available to us – six little notebooks of letters covering the period from December 1788 through to January 1794, just before her death.

Memoirs on the Terror are legion, but the kind of critical running commentary that the duchess provides on Paris between 1792 and 1794 is extremely rare from any quarter. Paris was then under ideological lockdown, as the country's increasingly authoritarian regime struggled to mobilise the French nation for the war with Europe. All means of public expression were restricted. The press and the theatre were tightly censored. Journalists and playwrights were jailed. Nobles were increasingly assumed to be counter-revolutionaries and subjected to imprisonment. The postal service in Paris was under strict surveillance. Arrests on the basis of being 'suspect' – an ever-expanding category – multiplied. Spies seemed to be everywhere. Surveillance committees made unannounced 'domiciliary visits' to check on private papers. Use of the guillotine was increasing. It took a special kind of courage to keep a record of open dissent in such times, especially when those views were unremittingly royalist and counter-revolutionary: even more so when one was writing just a matter of yards from the government offices in the Tuileries, headquarters of the Committee of Public Safety. But then the Duchess d'Elbeuf was a daring and doughty woman: her chronicle offers readers a striking sense of the experience of 'the best of times, the worst of times'.

### **Heads on pikes**

Like much of the high aristocracy, d'Elbeuf had originally fled from Paris and Versailles on the fall of the Bastille. She was appalled by the sight of men carrying around heads on pikes, 'like Turks or Englishmen'. 'I tremble in writing of such horrors', she noted, and feared for her life. Yet, while most of her peers left France altogether, the duchess chose to retire to her country estates in Picardy. But her plans to lie low were thwarted; she was nearly lynched as she made her way through a countryside in full revolt in July 1789. A year later she had to face down a local peasant rebellion.

From the beginning to the end of her chronicle the duchess equated the revolution with popular violence. She assigned blame for this squarely with the 'Third Estate' (as opposed to the noble and ecclesiastical orders). She used the term 'the Third Estate' with contemptuous disdain throughout her account, even though it passed out of general political discourse as early as June 1789, when the Estates General transformed into the National Assembly. At the heart of the 'dreadful Third Estate', she informed her friend, was an 'army of *philosophes à la française*'. 'The Third Estate is riddled with the philosophy particular to our century and of which Voltaire is one of the fathers.' The Enlightenment was the vehicle through which 'this bourgeoisie that is dominating us' had established its power. For the duchess, 1789 had inaugurated a truly bourgeois revolution.



Plan of Paris by Michel-Étienne Turgot. Illustration by Louis Bretez, engraving by Claude Lucas, 18th century © Bridgeman Images.

Maybe surprisingly for someone in her position, she was also highly critical of Louis XVI, whom she blamed for allying with the Third Estate against the two ‘privileged orders’, the clergy and the nobility. This ‘incomprehensible king of France’ had become a *Roi Tiers* – a ‘Third Estate king’. Yet he couldn’t prevent ‘the Third Estate playing tricks on him’ and lacked the mental fortitude to live with his decisions. Reports she received from courtiers depicted him in depression and given to bouts of weeping: ‘Prisoner of the dreadful Third Estate, this childlike monarch should choose his policy and get on a horse and call to those loyal to him to rally behind him.’ Were he to ‘man up’ in this way, he would soon have ‘the kingdom at his feet, the wild men sentenced and exterminated, and their property confiscated for this nation’. D’Elbeuf certainly talked the talk of counter-revolution.

Paris in early 1792 was not an optimal location for a woman of her breeding and background espousing such opinions. France was on the brink of war and soon to topple into terror. But it was here that she returned to live, following spells in her country estate at Moreuil and then in Tournai in the Austrian Netherlands, to where she had considered permanent emigration. The turbulence she had experienced at Moreuil from the local peasantry embittered her towards her country estate. Tenants she had viewed as forelock-tugging ‘vassals’ had turned into angry citizens, forceful in demanding their rights and willing to take direct action to secure gains. Nor did emigration turn out to be an embraceable option. Tournai had been full of exiled French nobles eking out a life of poverty, forced on them by the abolition of the seigneurial regime and other revolutionary laws. The National Assembly was about to declare the property of émigrés forfeit, moreover, which would mean financial ruin for political exiles. In addition, it was clear that the émigré community was seen as a problem by local rulers, who could not be counted on for continued hospitality. This was all the more problematic as war between France and Austria loomed and would be declared on 20 April 1792.

Opting to return home to Paris rather than to turbulent Moreuil or to poverty-stricken exile in Tournai was strongly conditioned by the duchess’ conviction that the revolution would soon be crushed in the coming war with Europe. The armies of the émigré princes (the king’s brothers, Artois and Provence) contained many brilliant generals. She was confident that, together with Austrian and soon Prussian and other allied forces, they would march on Paris to restore the king. It was not to be. In the event, the duchess would find herself in a city borne along irresistibly by popular unrest towards more radical and authoritarian government. Soon she was too scared to contemplate leaving Paris and there she would stay until her death.

Paris in the spring of 1792 was in a febrile state. The duchess wrote regretfully how this modern ‘Babylon’ was almost unrecognisable from former days. People of her own class had become rare. Further and ongoing waves of emigration had emptied the city of most of her friends. She was, she lamented, faced by ‘the most perfect solitude’.



*Louis XVI on 20 June 1792, 18th-century engraving © Bridgeman Images.*



*The Marquise de Rougé (centre) and her sons, the eldest of whom was the Duchess d'Elbeuf's heir, with the Marquise de Pezay. By Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, 1787 © Bridgeman Images.*

It struck her as odd that some aspects of the old Parisian *dolce vita* remained in place: there were still ‘theatrical performances (more than ever), public meetings, gambling dens, nice walks’ and so on. Yet, at the very same time, from the windows of her mansion she could see the guards massed around the entrance to the Tuileries keeping the king and his family in what seemed to her (and to them) a state of imprisonment. She also saw popular demonstrations on the Place du Carrousel and on the surrounding *quais*, as unruly crowds threatened what she ironically called ‘the sacred duty of insurrection’. On 20 June crowds invaded the king’s apartment and forced him to don a red bonnet and drink to the health of the nation. Throughout July and early August there were further attempts to force a way past the guards. The threat to life and limb seemed real. She had heard shouts of ‘Vive le Roi!’ and even ‘Vive la Reine!’, when Louis and Marie-Antoinette had been allowed out for 14 July celebrations. But now crude popular songs attacking the monarch drifted up through her windows. ‘We don’t know’, she wrote, ‘if each day will be our last and by what torment some new crime will occur.’

### **Eye of the storm**

The duchess’ mansion was at the eye of the revolutionary storm. In the uprising of 10 August 1792, which saw the overthrow of Louis XVI, cannon firing on the Tuileries were parked on her doorstep. A house adjoining hers was hit by shrapnel in the crossfire. After the event, as crowds hunted down and massacred the king’s loyal Swiss Guards in the street, she and her servants harboured anyone of Swiss extraction who was under threat. Later that month the new instrument of national retribution, the guillotine, would be erected on the Place and it would remain there until May 1793 (the duchess would keep a score of those who were executed).

The tragic dimensions of the overthrow of the monarchy struck the duchess forcefully. She had witnessed 10 August at close quarters, from seeing the king inspecting his Swiss Guards at 6am through to the assault on the palace and the ensuing massacres. Despite her acerbic criticisms of Louis, she was well aware of the huge material, symbolic and spiritual fall from grace he had endured. She came to admire his stoicism and was unsparing in her condemnation of the regicides over what in her eyes was ‘not just a crime, [but] an atrocity’. Recalling the narrow vote by which Louis was condemned to death, she stated:

*It was from a council of 721 so-called legislators of the nation that 361 votes have condemned him to death. Like the new disciples of Brutus, they believed that the most legitimate of kings was simply a tyrant ... They themselves are tyrants of a people whom they have blinded.*

The impact of the overthrow of the monarchy was aggravated by her realisation across the summer and early autumn that the allied powers and émigré princes were not going to come and rescue the monarchy. Foreign

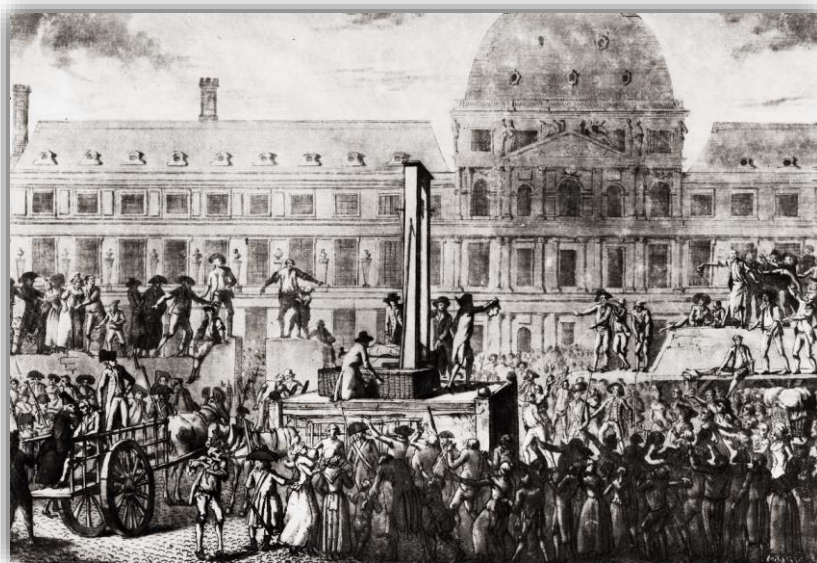
rulers, she believed, were insincere in their statements and wanted to play ‘king’s games’ for their own benefit. And the French people had rallied to the revolution’s standards.

*The French have become battle-hardened and no longer fear their enemies. They came to realise that they needed discipline and now they are transmitting their ideas to many of their neighbours, whose minds are full of the idea that they are the sovereign, they enjoy liberty and they are equal to their enemies.*

The republic had not proved the pushover that she had imagined. Indeed, it was on the march. A final blow to any remaining hope was the 1792 September Massacres, which saw gangs kill half the city’s prison population in scenes of horror. It triggered a spiritual revelation for her. This was her ‘Emmaus moment’, as she came to realise the active presence of God in the world in ways that commanded only passive obedience to the divine will. Rather than challenge the course of the revolution, as she had done earlier, she learned instead just to observe and record her feelings in the face of what she saw as evil. The revolution was the Devil’s work.

### **Soul searching**

The duchess remained a close and acute witness to the situation in Paris and an avid reporter of news. The substance of her chronicle increasingly mirrored the concerns of the ‘silly and impertinent’ republican press on which she drew. From her window she could see much, but now must have shrunk from looking. She had a carriage to get around the city, but were the streets safe? She could count on her servants to go out into Paris on their errands and keep the duchess up to date with stories, rumours and gossip. But, alongside all this, she contemplated increasingly the state of her own soul rather than witnessing events on her doorstep. The last months of her chronicle are a record of personal, psychological and spiritual crisis amid political turbulence.



*First execution by guillotine, Place du Carrousel, 13 August 1792. French 18th-century engraving © Bridgeman Images.*

Fear was now affecting her health, mental as well as physical, and reducing any capacity for action. Her letters to her friend became a lifeline, as she endured her worries and anxieties in a state of solitude:

*We spend our sad days all alone in our homes, for fear of being accused of plotting. But even so we don’t know if, despite this precaution, we won’t be accused of some serious fault and if we won’t have to share the gibbet fate of our holy king.*

By the spring and Summer of 1793, the material conditions of her life were deteriorating fast, bringing an even greater sense of fatalism and disengagement. Her pre-1789 levels of income had plummeted, and she faced inflation and shortages of basic necessities. In May 1793 local authorities confiscated her carriage for the war effort, followed by the removal of the last two horses in her stable. These measures reduced her mobility, for it seemed that she suffered with a disabling leg condition: ‘I am in prison, for I cannot walk’, she noted in May 1793 and by early 1794 was confessing: ‘My health is bad, my legs are swollen up.’

She lamented not only her own situation but also the fate of her friends, many of whom were being incarcerated and having to endure life sharing their cells with ‘fleas, lice and bedbugs’ (*les puces, les punaises, et les poux*). By October 1793 she was noting that:

*Every day is full of pain. It is our friends and relatives who are being dragged from their homes in the middle of the night and put five or six to a grim prison cell – for which they have to pay rent. People tell them in order to console them that they will remain there till peace is signed. It is rare for a day to pass without heads falling, with people dying even just for words they have spoken.*

This spectacle of suffering, as well as the feeling of being hated, with ‘terror riding pillion’ behind her, afflicted her, she confessed, ‘much more than my great age’:

*When we get up each morning we wonder if the day will see us being dragged off to prison and when we go to bed if someone is not going to come for us in the course of the night.*

Shut away from the political hurly-burly in her stately but empty rooms in the Hôtel d’Elbeuf, she took private pleasure in quietly maintaining her correspondence, in reading the Abbé Fleury’s history of the early church and in playing with a little family of cats, which had adopted her and offered slight solace.

No solace was to be found in public life. On 26 December 1793, in one of her final notations, she wrote: ‘Monsieur de Robespierre maintains that fewer heads of the common people should be cut off, in that the execution of the great makes more of an impression.’ The paroxysm of the Terror was on the horizon, as the duchess resiliently but with quiet resignation awaited the knock on her door.

**Colin Jones** is Professor of History at Queen Mary, University of London. He is co-editor, with Alex Fairfax-Cholmeley and Simon Macdonald, of *The Duchesse d’Elbeuf’s Letters to a Friend, 1788-94*, which will be published next year. His latest book is *The Fall of Robespierre: 24 Hours in Revolutionary Paris* (Oxford University Press, 2021).