

The trial and execution of louis xvi



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A series of unfortunate events led to the deposition and ultimate execution of Louis XVI in January 1793. Louis' plight, from the flight to Varennes in June 1791 to the guillotine on 21 January 1793, was one of constant blunders and calamitous decisions. Along with this, Louis was unable to rely on his closest allies, whom in attempts to save him and themselves, brought about his demise with haste. The Republicans of the Convention debated over the means by which Louis should be tried, if he should be tried at all.

Furthermore, most polarizing for the Convention was what should be done with Louis once he had been found guilty.

Throughout the revolution, Louis and his allies made irretrievable errors in judgment. One of the more severe instances of this was the royal families flight to Varennes, 20-25 June 1791. This saw a marked rise in distrust of the monarchy, as its intentions toward the Revolution were no longer certain. Unfortunately for Louis, The Flight to Varennes coincided with the declaration of Pillnitz by Frederick William II of Prussia and Leopold II of Austria, August 27. The general view of this, is that it served to 'unite the forces of counter-revolution' and 'prepare the nation for an offensive crusade against the crowned head of Europe.'

Interestingly, Emperor Leopold when he was Grand Duke of Tuscany, had granted a constitution to his subjects. When he ascended the throne as Emperor in 1790, Leopold gave consistent advice to Louis to "give the Constitution a chance." This was the beginning of a multitude of ultimately fatal mistakes by Louis and his allies. The enemies of Louis XVI naturally had a key role in his downfall as well. In early November, the Girondins actively sought a confrontation with the King. They achieved this by introducing

severe legislation against the émigrés and the refractory priests. Some view this as an attempt by the Girondins to force Louis to either identify 'himself with their interpretation of the revolution or appearing as a traitor.' Louis was forced to employ his Constitutional veto in order to avoid these measures becoming law. Thus the Girondins achieved their desired outcome. This also meant that Louis was now hesitant to use his veto, as when he did it brought further scrutiny.

Furthermore, Louis was fighting against a political climate that was incensed by the economic deprivation at the time. Between January and March 1792 there was a series of riots throughout the country protesting food prices. The slave uprising in Saint-Domingue in late 1791 led to the sugar shortage, which precipitated the riots. 'The price of sugar rose in a few days from 22-25 sous to 3 livres or 3 ½ livres a pound. This produced a political climate that was radical and desperate.

"Once more, as in 1789, it was the economic crisis that first drew the menu people into activity."

The peasantry and again the women of Paris led the way in demanding a limit on prices being introduced. It was however, the outbreak of war that would throw the monarchy further into despair.

Louis feared going to war, as it would only escalate the tensions in France. Although, "As much as war itself, however, Louis feared taking responsibility for its outbreak." Therefore, this was the reason for Louis re-structuring the Ministry primarily with Girondins, whom recommended a declaration of war against Austria, which Louis hoped would shift the blame away from him and

onto those who wanted to see an end to the monarchy. April 20 saw the declaration of war against Austria. At first the rhetoric of the Legislative Assembly coupled with Louis' support for the decision, saw a rise in Louis' popularity.

However, after the French armies suffered a series of defeats, Louis dismissed the Girondin ministers he had put in place for this very reason. It is argued that this act "provided the pretext for the demonstration of 20 June". To this initial assault on the Tuileries Louis had almost no defence. This was due to Louis' inability to veto legislation replacing his constitutional bodyguard with national guardsmen on 29 May. It was argued that the constitutional bodyguard had "excessive personal loyalty to a monarch nobody now trusted." A poignant commentary of the events of 20 June, comes from the American ambassador at the time, he wrote in his diary the day following the riot, "The Constitution this Day has given its last Groan."

On July 25, news of the Brunswick Manifesto reaches Paris. This is another calamitous attempt by Louis' allies to save him and his family. The Duke of Brunswick is the head of the Prussian army that is pressing deep into French territory. It warns that should the popular movement harm the royal family, an "exemplary and eternally memorable revenge" will follow. This only served to further incense the patriotic fervour in France and promoted the idea that Louis was plotting against the Revolution. The Brunswick Manifesto precipitated the final storming of the Tuileries on 10 August and therefore the downfall of Louis XVI.

On September 3, Verdun, the last fortress that stood between Brunswick and Paris, fell to Prussian forces. This led to general panic in Paris, which resulted in the rounding up and arrest of some 3,000, supposed political prisoners. Following this, what is known as the September Massacres took place.

“ Between 1,100 and 1,400 prisoners (only 37 of them women) had been slaughtered out of a total of 2,800 in the nine prisons concerned... Only one-quarter of the prisoners were priests, nobles, or ‘ political’.”

Although this was a heinous act, it helped to consolidate the perception of security amongst those who would have to leave their families to go fight at the front, the sans-culottes. Corresponding to this, the French stopped the Prussian advance at the battle of Valmy on 20 September. This placed Louis' security further at risk, as the convention, which convened on the same day, no longer feared reprisal for harming Louis.

The final evidence against Louis was the discovery of the armoire de fer. This revealed Louis' dealings with Mirabeau, Talon, La Fayette and Dumouriez. While it merely displayed exercises of eighteenth century patronage by a constitutional monarch, it was no less shocking to the deputies. Furthermore, the supporters of the king had created the climate in which the trial of the King could proceed.

Initially, there was debate over whether or not, firstly if the king could be tried for his supposed crimes and if he should be. Vergniaud suggested that due to the Constitution, the king, inviolable under the constitution, could legitimately be tried at all. Moreover, the constitution of 1791, under which

France continued to be governed until 1795, envisaged only three acts for which the King was responsible: retracting his oath to uphold the Constitution, leading an army against the forces of the Nation and leaving the Kingdom.

Louis had done none of these things and had, in any case, already incurred the only penalty that is provided by the constitution, dethronement. Indeed, as Robespierre rightly observed, if the Constitution of 1791 were applied, the National Convention would be on trial and not the King. Furthermore, although the Girondins had initially pushed for the king to be removed from office, they now sought to preserve the monarch. It is noted that they are in “no hurry whatever since the group’s secret desire was to adjourn the trial for as long as possible.” Therefore, they become “exposed to accusations of Royalism.” The political rhetoric was at its height at this point, as each group knew what the outcome of the impending trial would likely be. Danton succinctly puts this, “If judgment is passed on him, he’s a dead man.”

The Convention being composed in the most part of lawyers was full of opinion on whether there was legal standing for the king to be tried. Many made reference to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens. Arguing that as it antedated the Constitution, Article VI, that outlined, “Law... must be the same for all, whether it protects or whether it punishes,” overrode the supposed inviolability of the king. Furthermore, Montagnards such as Saint-Just argued “the tyrant had already been tried, and found guilty, on 10 August by the people.” It was the discovery of the *armoire de fer* that made it “impossible to adjourn the trial to any further date.”

“ Out of 721 voters, only 361 voted unconditionally for death – a majority of one.”

The other issue that divided the Republicans now that Louis had been found guilty was what was to be done with him. In an attempt to save the King's life the Girondins argued that whatever sentence was passed should be subject to confirmation by a referendum, ‘ an appeal to the people’. This was in the hope that the provinces would reject the death penalty, which Paris desired. Furthermore, the Girondins hoped to embarrass Robespierre, “ if he tried to oppose so democratic a proposal.” However, it is suggested that rumors that the sans-culottes would storm the Temple, where Louis was imprisoned, “ perhaps swayed the votes of some.” It was following this that on 21 January 1793, Louis XVI, formally known as Louis XVI, an important distinction, was guillotined.

It was the absolute end to any immediate return to monarchy. “ By executing the King the Montagne left the nation with no possible result except outright victory.” Louis led a life that was reflective of the indisputable fact that, he was never meant to be king in the first place. The way in which he governed and the advice and aid that was provided to him from his allies, for the most part was to the detriment of him. It wasn't until too late that “ Louis XVI showed the unexpected courage which dignified the last months of his dismal life and reign.” The Republicans that Louis fought against battled with the groundbreaking events of the revolution. There were not many precedents for a people putting their divine ruler on trial, this showed through in the indecision on whether Louis should be tried and then

the sentence that should be passed. Unfortunately it wasn't until he was nearing death that we saw the best of Louis XVI.

‘ These men see dangers and poison everywhere; they fear I will kill myself. Alas they know me very badly; to kill myself would be weakness. No, since die I must I will die well!’