

THE MASSACRE AT THE CARMELITE CONVENT

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In the first week of 1792, 1,300 or so persons were put to death in the prisons of Paris.

On September 2nd, in the Carmelite convent, 113 priests and one secular were brutally murdered in the space of two hours.

My intention is not to go back over the story of this despicable massacre: it has already been told and will be told again, by better writers than myself.

I intend simply to follow the dry chronology of events and recount what happened during this period in our own part of the town (Saint-Sulpice, Luxembourg) and, in particular, in the Carmelite convent.

August 10th: The Tuileries Palace was attacked. The troops from Marseilles, garrisoned in the Cordeliers, took an active part. Fall of the monarchy.

August 11th: The Luxembourg section (district) of Paris held its meetings normally in the seminary of St Sulpice. While it was in plenary session in the church, it received orders from the Revolutionary Council to arrest nobles and priests who had not taken the oath. The section council, led by a certain Legendre, "the Butcher", decided to act on its orders immediately, and a commissioner was appointed to organise the arrests.

On learning of this decision, the juring parish priest of St Sulpice wrote to Pétion, the Mayor of Paris, to warn him against spilling blood, but to no avail.

On the same day, Saturday August 11th, street patrols arrested 60 or so priests. These wore secular dress and, thinking they were safe, had taken lodgings close to St Sulpice in rue Cassette, rue des Canettes, rue du Pot de Fer, rue des Aveugles, rue des Fossoyeurs...

They were led through the jeering crowd to the section offices. Here they were interrogated and searched and then, at about nine o'clock in the evening, were led off along rue Férou and rue de Vaugirard to the Carmelite church, walking in single file and guarded by soldiers of the National Guard.

In charge of this group of prisoners was a certain Joachim Peyrat. He was a former mathematics teacher, a recently appointed justice of the peace, and lived in rue Férou. The

prisoners and their 50 guards were locked up in the Carmelite church, which had been turned into a makeshift prison. Apart from some chairs, there was no furniture and no toilet facilities: the inmates slept on the floor.

During the days that followed and often late at night, other priests joined them in their prison.

August 15th, the Assumption: Patriot Lazowski, known as "the Thunderbolt", brought in another load to the sound of drums. Some of the new prisoners had been arrested at Issy, in the country house belonging to the seminary. Others, many of them very old priests, had been rounded up at the St François retirement home.

August 16th: At the beginning of the afternoon, as a result of a whole series of arrests in the various religious houses in the Vaugirard district, a large number of priests and seminarians was led into Paris along the rue de Sèvres, guarded by the National Guard, escorted by people armed with pikes, and followed by a screaming and hostile crowd. When this procession reached the Premonstratensian church at the corner of rue du Four and rue du Cherche Midi, the prisoners were taken to the former monastery and sorted out: the young people were sent back to Vaugirard with permission to return to their families, while the priests were dragged off, at the dead of night, to the Carmelite church.

House-to-house searches continued in the days that followed, but the manhunt was not very productive as people had gone into hiding.

The guards in front of the Carmelite convent in the rue de Vaugirard were changed twice a day. Many of the guards came from the provinces - Brittany, Marseilles.

Fortunately, life inside the church improved a little. Charitable persons were allowed to visit prisoners and bring them mattresses, blankets, clothes and linen.

A caterer by the name of Langlois was put in charge of the kitchen, and he provided food for all the prisoners.

Visits from relatives and friends were allowed at fixed times. Visitors brought news from the outside and were able to see the conditions in which the prisoners lived.

For reasons of health, prisoners were allowed into the convent garden for a few hours each day.

August 27th: Manuel, the Procurator General of the City came to the Carmelite convent. He read out to the assembled prisoners a decree passed the previous day according to which non-juring priests were to leave French territory within a week or face deportation to Guyana. They would be given a passport and three livres per day for their journey. They were advised to have people bring them new clothes and money.

August 30th: The City General Council passed a law according to which city sections were to interrogate and pass judgment on the citizens arrested in the preceding days.

August 31st: The oldest prisoners were interrogated. They were given permission to remain in France but had to inform the authorities where they wanted to go.

On September 1st, visitors informed the prisoners that the gates of Paris had been closed and that there were rumours that Verdun had fallen.

Among the prisoners there were ten seculars, probably arrested as a result of some mistake. They were all set free with the exception of Régis de Valfons who, for reasons of loyalty, wanted to stay with his friend Abbé Guilleminet, a curate in the parish of Saint Roch.

Sunday September 2nd: The weather was fine, it was hot and the sun shone brightly. Close to midday, the alarm gun on the Pont Neuf was fired, the big bell of St Sulpice sounded the alarm, and drums beat out the call to arms, calling upon people to read the announcements pasted up on walls by the city authorities. The message read as follows: "*To Arms Citizens, to Arms! The Enemy is at our gates!*"

As the morning came to an end, Danton completed his speech in the Assembly calling for the mobilisation of France to repel the invader. "*To win, we need daring, more daring, constant daring, and then France will be saved!*"

At one o'clock, Ceyrat, the section commissioner, came to take the roll call of the prisoners. At the same time the prisoners' knives were confiscated. The guards were changed. There were more of them than usual, most of them without uniforms and armed with pikes.

At the beginning of the afternoon, there was a plenary meeting of the Luxembourg section council in the church of St Sulpice under the chairmanship of Joachim Ceyrat. On the agenda there was one item: **Measures to be taken for the public good.** Among those attending the meeting were many soldiers from Marseilles who were garrisoned at the Cordeliers.

Louis Prière, a wine merchant, living in the cours des Fontaines, near the Luxembourg, made a speech about the seriousness of the situation. He said they had to go and face the invader, but first the prisons had to be cleared of their inmates.

There were many who did not agree with this view. Alexandre Carcel, a watchmaker living in rue des Aveugles, was of the opinion that, while there were guilty people in prison, there were also good people. Many agreed with what he said.

Ceyrat spoke again and won the assembly over to his way of thinking. He asserted that "*all those imprisoned in the Carmelite convent were guilty, and it was time the people meted out justice.*"

There were shouts from the assembled people that there was only one way to solve the question of **the prisoners: death!**

Carcel felt that atrocities were about to be committed. He went to find Captain Tanche who, with his detachment of the National Guard, was stationed in rue Palatine. He asked him to go to the Carmelite convent to maintain order. He would not move because he had no orders.

The greatest supporters of the Prière motion, Parisians and soldiers from Marseilles, made their way, shouting loudly, along rue Férou and rue de Vaugirard to the Carmelite convent. It was 4.30 in the afternoon and the beginning of the massacre. There was a sound of shots and the shouts of the murderers.

Thirty or so priests managed to escape by clambering over the wall and running off along rue Cassette, rue du Cherche Midi or rue du Regard.

At about 5 o'clock, Maillard came from the Abbey where

he had already set about his bloody work. He was accompanied by Violette, the section commissioner, and a shouting crowd of armed men.

When he heard of the killings, Citizen Petit, the second in charge of the troops, tried to stir the people up to stop the carnage. No one listened to him. Bourgeois then took the stand and appealed to the assembly to go and help the prisoners in the Carmelite convent. He was told it was too late.

Captain Tanche, the one who had been waiting in rue Palatine, finally went to the Carmelite convent and later declared that he had not been able to do anything. In the meantime, a battalion of the Guard was doing manoeuvres in the Luxembourg Gardens.

At 6.30 the massacre was over: 114 persons had been murdered.

The doors of the church were open. A small crowd made its way into the church and into the garden where the bloody remains of the victims lay in heaps. Some of the executioners had already begun to celebrate by getting drunk.

Seven priests, for various reasons, had not been killed. In spite of the screaming crowds in front of the church, the Guards managed to take them back to Saint Sulpice.

On September 3rd, the priests who had escaped death and had spent the night at the seminary of Saint Sulpice, were interrogated by the president of the section and then released. Guards accompanied them to where they lived.

Daubanel, the section secretary, gave instructions for the bodies to be stripped and taken in two carts to the Vaugirard cemetery. Some of the bodies were, in fact, thrown into the well or buried in the Carmelite convent garden.

During the course of this bloody day, the locality remained very quiet. People strolled around the Luxembourg Gardens, separated from the massacre only by the width of the rue de Vaugirard.

Children played as usual: our fellow citizens knew nothing, heard nothing, saw nothing.

They did not read the posters calling for repression; they did not know that the Luxembourg section council was preaching murder. They did not hear the shots fired, nor the screams of the murderers. They did not see the groups of killers armed with sabres and pikes rushing down rue de Vaugirard. Finally, they did not see the open carts carrying away the bodies. And yet, these killers, aged between 25 and 40, were for the most part good local craftsmen who received a wage for their terrible task that day.

And so, what were the feelings of our fellow citizens that day? Was it complicity? indifference? fear? No one will ever know. One thing is sure, however: on Sunday September 2nd 1792, in the space of two hours, in broad daylight, 114 people were murdered in rue de Vaugirard.

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