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HIST 110-50

16 February 2015

Primary Document Analysis – Storming the Bastille

Paris was rather unsettled in 1789, and the storming of the Bastille, which took place on July 14 of that very year, is clear evidence of this fact. The people of Paris wanted to overthrow the monarchy, which was abusing its powers, and the storming of the Bastille was a major step that the Parisians took towards that goal. There were many things that contributed to this state of public opinion. For one thing, the king had allowed France to get into a massive financial crisis. Also, there was an unfair political imbalance with the Three Estates system in favor of the nobility and clergy and at the expense of the working class. After analyzing primary documents from the period, it is easy to decipher additional reasons as to why the state of public opinion might have been what it was, as well as how the crowds that stormed the Bastille were mobilized and just who exactly made up those crowds.

There was a lot of tension and anger built up in Paris in July of 1789. First of all, the crop yield had been poor, so there was a dearth of wheat to make bread, one of the staples of the French diet. Source 7 shows how the percent of a family’s income that was being spent solely on bread had skyrocketed in 1789. A glance at Source 5 and Source 6 gives insight into how an adult living in 1789 might be feeling; in addition to being hungry, and therefore angry and motivated, an adult during this period might be feeling extremely worried, because he or she would remember when the prices of wheat increased back in 1770, and how unpleasant that had been. Examination of Source 1 can be indicative of another reason that the anger of the Parisians was on the rise in 1789. The author of Source 1 was Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet, who was vocally critical of the monarchy. He was one of the men who had been imprisoned in the Bastille. As he described it, he had been “delivered without resources of any kind…to absolute silence…, to a nonexistence more cruel than death….There he wears himself out fruitlessly begging for legal redress, notification of the charges against him, the intervention of his friends. He utters his prayers, laments, and supplications in vain.” The fact that one of the advocates for the overthrowing of the monarchy was thrown in jail without any chance to even plea his case was likely very stirring for the Parisians.

It was likely very easy for word regarding intentions of storming the Bastille to get around in Paris. For one thing, Source 2 shows how busy and public a place the king’s palace was. There were always people around, so word of mouth could potentially spread quickly. Source 3 and Source 4 are also evidence of this; both of these sources show in what close quarters many Parisians were living. With so many people living in the same building, information could spread like wildfire. Source 11 shows how prominent pamphlet printing was becoming in Paris. The author writes that, “Every hour produces something new. Thirteen came out to-day, sixteen yesterday, and ninety-two last week.” This would be yet another way that word regarding the events of July 14, 1789 could have been effectively spread.

The Source 8 map shows how the location of the Bastille affected who the members of the crowds that stormed it were. The people who lived near the Bastille were those who had enough money to be able to afford to protest, but who had little enough to still be sufficiently affected by the financial crisis, thus motivating them to start an uprising. Source 9 supports this interpretation; an analysis of the list of people who stormed the Bastille shows that there were no housewives (women), no beggars (who would have been poor) and no journalists (who would have been richer) participating in the storming of the Bastille. Source 3 and Source 4 also provide insight into who made up the crowds; many of the people living together in the buildings in Paris worked for a shop owner (who often lived with them as well). Workers who relied on their jobs to support themselves and their families were likely fairly loyal to their bosses, so it would have been easy for shop owners who supported the idea of a **coup d’état to convince their workers to join in on the storming of the Bastille. Source 10, the letter written by the wife of the injured man who participated on July 14, 1789 also shows what kind of people were participating. The woman is clearly used to having her family supported by her working husband, who, due to his injuries, “**has the misfortune of being crippled for the rest of his days without ever being able to work again in his life because of wounds received on all parts of his body.” She would not be writing to the legislators in search of compensation if they were noble/wealthy enough to live without her husband working.

The analysis of primary documents leads to the discovery of evidence supporting what is known about the state of Paris during the late 1780s. In July of 1789 the Parisians were hungry, angry, and motivated. Through word of mouth and the booming pamphlet business, a mass of people was mobilized, and they stormed the Bastille in an effort to overthrow the monarchy. These revolutionaries were members of the bourgeoisie in Paris, those who were educated enough and could afford to revolt, but who were not well-off enough to be unaffected by the terrible financial situation in France.