



HISTORY STORIES



How Bread Shortages Helped Ignite the French Revolution

When Parisians stormed the Bastille in 1789 they weren't only looking for arms, they were on the hunt for more grain—to make bread.

UNA MCILVENNA • SEP 30, 2019

The French Revolution. Credit: Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images

Voltaire once [remarked](#) that Parisians required only “the comic opera and white bread.” But bread has also played a dark role in French history and, namely, the [French Revolution](#). The storming of the medieval fortress of Bastille on July 14, 1789 began as a hunt for arms—and grains to make bread.

The French Revolution was obviously caused by a multitude of grievances more complicated than the price of bread, but bread shortages played a role in stoking anger toward the monarchy. [Marie Antoinette](#)'s supposed quote upon hearing that her subjects had no bread: “Let them eat cake!” is [entirely apocryphal](#), but it epitomizes how bread could become a flashpoint in French history.

Poor grain harvests led to riots as far back as 1529 in the French city of Lyon. During the so-called *Grande Rebeayne* (Great Rebellion), thousands looted and destroyed the houses of rich citizens, eventually spilling the grain from the municipal granary onto the streets.

Things only got worse in the 18th century. Since the 1760s, the king had been counseled by Physiocrats, a group of economists who believed that the wealth of nations was derived solely from the value of land development and that agricultural products should be highly priced. Under their counsel the crown had tried intermittently to deregulate the domestic grain trade and introduce a form of free trade.

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It didn't work. In late April and May 1775, food shortages and high prices ignited an explosion of popular anger in the towns and villages of the Paris Basin. Over 300 riots and expeditions to pillage grain were recorded in the space of a little over three weeks. The wave of popular protest became known as the Flour War. The rioters invaded Versailles before spreading into Paris and outward into the countryside.

The problems became acute in the 1780s because of a range of factors. A huge rise in population had occurred (there were 5-6 million more people in France in 1789 than in 1720) without a corresponding increase in native grain production. The refusal on the part of most of the French to eat anything but a cereal-based diet was another major issue. Bread likely accounted for 60-80 percent of the budget of a wage-earner's family in the ancien regime—so even a small rise in grain prices could spark tensions.

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Arthur Young, an English agriculturalist who was traveling through France in the period leading up to the Revolution, could see that the seeds of revolution had been sown.

“Everything conspires to render the present period in France critical; the want of bread is terrible; accounts arrive every moment from the provinces of riots and disturbances, and calling in the military, to preserve the peace of the markets.”

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As the monarch was required to ensure the food supply of his subjects, the king was nicknamed “le premier boulanger du royaume” (First Baker of the Kingdom). His Finance Minister Jacques Necker claimed that, to show solidarity with those who lacked wheat, King Louis XVI was eating the lower-class *maslin* bread. Maslin bread is from a mix of wheat and rye, rather than the elite *manchet*, white bread that is achieved by sifting wholemeal flour to remove the wheatgerm and bran (and which meant one had enough wheat at one’s disposal to discard a bulk of it in the process).

But such measures were not enough, and bread (or the lack of it) was exploited as a weapon by revolutionary minds. A [plot drawn up at Passy](#) in 1789 to foment rebellion against the crown, allegedly proposed several articles, the second of which was to “do everything in our power to ensure that the lack of bread is total, so that the bourgeoisie are forced to take up arms.” Shortly thereafter the Bastille was stormed.

Bread may have helped spur on the French Revolution, but the revolution did not end French anxiety over bread. On August 29, 1789, only two days after completing the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, the Constituent Assembly completely deregulated domestic grain markets. The move raised fears about speculation, hoarding and exportation.

On October 21, 1789, a baker, Denis François, was accused of hiding loaves from sale as part of a plot to deprive the people of bread. Despite a hearing which proved him innocent, the crowd dragged François to the Place de Grève, hanged and decapitated him and made his pregnant wife kiss his bloodied lips.

As [Turgot](#), an early economic adviser to Louis XVI, once advised the king, “Ne vous mêlez pas du pain”—Do not meddle with bread.

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