Death of the Old Regime?

Gustav III of Sweden on the fall of the Bastille, 1789

Letter from Gustav III to Count Stendingk, his ambassador at St Petersburg, 7 August 1789

Nothing is more terrible than the events at Paris between 12th and 15th July: the Invalides broken into; canon and armed force used against the Bastille; this fortress taken by storm; the governor, Monsieur de Launay, dragged by the mob to the Place de Grève and decapitated; his head carried in triumph around the town; the same treatment meted out to the chief magistrate; the formation of a civil militia of 48,000 men; the French and Swiss guards joined with the people; Monsieur de Lafayette proclaimed commander-in-chief of the Paris militia; blue and red cockades raised, the Estates declaring the King’s ministers and the civil and military authorities to be responsible to the nation; and the King, alone with the Comte de Provence and the Comte d’Artois, going on foot, without escort, to the Assembly, almost to apologise, and to request assistance to put down the disturbances: this is how weakness, uncertainty and an imprudent violence will overturn the throne of Louis XVI. I am still so disturbed by this news that I am afraid my letter shows it.


1 Blue and red were the colours of the city of Paris. The tricolor (red, white and blue) devised by Lafayette, replaced the white fleur-de-lys of the house of Bourbon as the flag of Revolutionary France on 17 July 1789.

6 The king’s brothers, later Louis XVIII (1814–24) and Charles X (1824–30).