

# Chapter 53

## Counter-Revolution in Brittany--Assassination of Marat

1909

**People :**

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**Text :**

Girondins stir up civil war -- Royalist plot discovered -- English prepare insurrection in Normandy and Brittany -- Insurrection falls through -- Weakness of republican forces -- Commissioners of Convention succeed in rousing towns -- Charlotte Corday -- Implication of Girondins in plot -- Assassination of Marat -- Execution of Chalier -- Character and work of Marat

Assailed from all sides by the coalition of European monarchies, in the midst of the tremendous work of reconstruction which she had undertaken, France found herself in the throes of a terrible crisis. And it is in studying this crisis in its details, in realizing the sufferings which the people had to endure from day to day, that we realize the enormity of the crime committed by the leisured classes, when, in order to retain their privileges, they did not hesitate to plunge France into the horrors of a civil war and a foreign invasion.

Nevertheless, the Girondist leaders did not shrink after their exclusion from the Convention on June 2, 1793, from going to the provinces, to fan there, with the support of royalists and even of foreigners, the flame of civil war.

It may be remembered that after excluding thirty-one Girondist members from its midst, the Convention placed them under home-arrest, leaving them the right of going about in Paris, under the condition of being accompanied by a gendarme. Vergniaud, Gensonné, Fonfrède, remained in Paris, and from time to time Vergniaud addressed letters, full of venom, to the Convention. As to the others, they escaped and went to rouse the provinces. The royalists could not desire anything better. Anti-revolutionary risings broke out in sixty departments--the most extreme Girondins and the royalists working hand in hand.

Since 1791 a royalist plot was already hatching in Brittany--its aim being to reestablish the old States-General of this province, and the old administration by the three orders. Tufin, Marquis de la Rouèrie-Rezière, had been placed by the emigrant princes at the head of this conspiracy. The plot, however, was denounced to Danton, who had it watched by one of his secret agents. The Marquis de la Rouèrie-Rezière was forced to go into hiding, and in January 1793, he died in La Guyaumarais, the châteaux of one of his friends, where he was

buried secretly. The insurrection broke out, however, with the support of the English.

With the aid of smugglers and the *émigrés* who lived in Jersey and in London, the English Government prepared a tremendous insurrection which was to place in its hands the fortified towns of Saint-Malo, Brest, Cherbourg, and perhaps also Nantes and Bordeaux. After the Convention had decreed the arrest of the most important Girondist members, Pétion, Gaudet, Brissot, Barbaroux, Louvet, Buzot, and Lanjuinais went to Normandy and Brittany, to take the leadership of the insurrection there. On reaching Caen, they at once organized a League of the United Counties, with the intention of marching against Paris. They had the delegates of the Convention arrested, and they excited popular feeling against the Montagnards. General Wimpffen, who was in command of the Republican troops in Normandy, and who took up the cause of the insurgents, did not hide from them his royalist opinions and his intention to seek support in England; but, notwithstanding this, the Girondist leaders did not break with him.

Happily the people in Normandy and Brittany did not follow the lead of the royalists and the clergy. The towns ranged themselves on the side of the Revolution, and the insurrection, having been crushed at Vernon, fell through.<sup>1</sup>

The march of the Girondist leaders through Brittany, along the dark, walled country lanes, not daring to show themselves even in the smallest towns, where the republicans would have arrested them, shows how little sympathy they found, even in this Breton country, where the Convention had not won the favor of the peasants, and where the levying of recruits for the war on the Rhine was, of course, fiercely resented. When Wimpffen intended to march against Paris, Caen only furnished him with a few dozen volunteers.<sup>2</sup> In the whole of Normandy and Brittany only five to six hundred men were enlisted, and they did not even fight when they found themselves face to face with a small army arrived from Paris.

In some towns, however, especially in the seaports of Saint-Malo and Brest, the royalists found staunch supporters among the merchant class, and a tremendous effort was necessary for the republicans to prevent Saint-Malo from giving itself up, as Toulon had done, to the English.

One must, indeed, read the letters of the young Jullien, commissioner of the Committee of Public Welfare, and of Jeanbon Saint-André, commissioner of the National Convention, to understand how weak were the material forces of the Republic, and how willing the well-to-do classes were to uphold the foreign invaders.

Everything had been prepared to give up the fortress of Saint-Malo to the English fleet, armed as it was with 123 cannon, 25 mortars, and well stocked with cannon-ball, bombs and powder. It was only the arrival of the commissioners of the Convention which rekindled the zeal of the republicans and prevented this treachery.

These commissioners did not rely upon the local administrative bodies; they knew them to be worm-eaten with royalism and "commercialism." They went straight to the Popular Society of each town, whether small or large. They proposed to this society to "purify" itself. Each member had to state openly before the whole society what he had been before 1789; what he had done since then; whether he had signed the royalist petitions of the 8000 or 20,000; what had been his fortune before 1789, and what it was at the present moment. Those who could not give satisfactory answers to these questions were excluded from the Republican Society.

After this the society became the recognized organ of the Convention. With its aid the commissioner proceeded to a similar purification in the municipality and had the royalist members and profit-mongers (*profiteurs*) excluded. Then, supported by the society, they

roused the enthusiasm of the population, especially of the *sans-culottes*. They directed the enlisting of volunteers and induced the patriots to make efforts often heroic, for the defense of the coasts. They organized republican *fêtes* and introduced the republican calendar. And when they left, to accomplish the same work elsewhere, they handed over to the new municipality the work of taking all necessary measures for the transport of ammunition, provisions, troops, when asked to do so by the commissioners of the Convention--always under the supervision of the local Popular Society with which they maintained a regular correspondence.

Very often the war demanded extraordinary sacrifices. But in each town, in Quimper, in Saint-Malo itself, the commissioners of the Convention found men devoted to the Revolution; with their aid they organized the defense. The *émigrés* and the British ships did not even dare to approach Saint-Malo or Brest.

Thus the royalist insurrection failed both in Normandy and in Brittany. Yet it was from Caen that Charlotte Corday came to assassinate Marat. Influenced, no doubt, by all that she heard said against the Republic of the *sans-culotte* Montagnards, dazzled perhaps by the refined republican airs which the Girondins who had come to Caen gave themselves, and where she met Barbaroux, Charlotte Corday arrived on July 11 in Paris, determined to murder some one of the eminent revolutionists.

The Girondist chroniclers, who all hated Marat, the chief organizer of May 31, have made out that Charlotte Corday was a republican. This is absolutely untrue. Mademoiselle Marie Charlotte Corday d'Armont belonged to an arch-royalist family, and her two brothers had emigrated. She herself, brought up in the convent of l'Abbaye-aux-Dames at Caen, now lived with a relation, Madame de Breteville, who was only prevented by fear from openly calling herself a royalist. All the so-called "republicanism" of Mademoiselle Corday d'Armont lay in the fact that she refused once to drink the king's health, and explained her refusal by saying that she would be a republican "if the French were worthy of a Republic." That is to say, she was a constitutionalist, probably a "Feuillante." General Wimpff even described her simply as a royalist.

Everything leads us to believe that Charlotte Corday d'Armont did not stand alone. Caen, as we have just seen, was the center of the Federation of the United Departments, organized against the Montagnard Convention, and it is very probable that a plot had been prepared for July 14 or 15, to kill on that day "Danton, Robespierre, Marat and Company," and that Charlotte Corday knew of this. Her visit to the Girondin Duperret, to whom she handed over some leaflets and a letter from Barbaroux--then at Caen--and whom she advised to retire to Caen without delay, tend rather to represent Charlotte Corday as the tool of a plot hatched at Caen by the Girondins and the royalists.<sup>3</sup>

The original plan of Charlotte Corday had been, she said, to kill Marat on the Champ-de-Mars, on July 14, during the anniversary *fête* of the Revolution, or should he not be there, at the sitting of the Convention. But the *fête* had been put off, and Marat, who was ill, did not attend the Convention.

Then she wrote to him, begging to be received, and on obtaining no answer, she wrote again, playing this time jesuitically on his kindness, of which she knew, or of which her friends had spoken to her. In this letter she said she was unhappy, persecuted, knowing for certain that with such a recommendation she would be received.

With this note, and a dagger hidden in her scarf, she went on July 13, at seven o'clock in the evening, to Marat. His wife, Catherine Evrard, after hesitating a little, finally allowed the young lady to enter the modest room of the people's friend.

Marat, wasted by fever for the past two or three months, after the life of a tracked wild beast which he had led since 1789, was seated in a closed bath, correcting the proofs of his paper on a board placed across the bath. It was here that Charlotte Corday d'Armont struck the Friend of the People in the breast. His death was instantaneous.

Three days later, on the 16th another friend of the people, Chalier, was executed by the Girondins at Lyons.

In Marat, the people lost their most devoted friend. The partizans of the Girondins have represented him as a bloodthirsty madman, who did not even know what he wanted. But we know to-day how such reputations are made. The fact is, that in the dark years of 1790 and 1791, when he saw that all the heroism of the people had not been able to break the royal power, Marat began to despair, and he wrote that a few thousand aristocratic heads ought to be sacrificed to make the Revolution succeed. However, in the depth of his heart, he was not at all bloodthirsty. He only loved the people, both he and his heroic mate, Catherine Evrard,<sup>4</sup> with a love far deeper than that of any other prominent revolutionist, and to this love he remained true.

From the day the Revolution began, Marat took to bread and water, not figuratively speaking, but in reality. And when he was murdered, the entire fortune of the Friend of the People was a note for 25 livres (francs).

With this love of the people to guide him, Marat, who also was older than most of his revolutionist comrades, and had more experience, understood the various phases of the Revolution, and foresaw what was to come, far better than did any of his contemporaries. He was the only one, we may say, of the revolutionary leaders who had a real understanding of events and power of grasping them as a whole, in their intricate bearings on one another.

5

That he had a certain amount of vanity is to be explained to some extent by the fact that he was always pursued, always tracked, even in the greatest days of the Revolution, while each new phase of the Revolution only confirmed the accuracy of his predictions. But these are mere details. The distinctive feature of his mind was that at each given moment he understood what had to be done for the triumph of the people's cause--the triumph of the people's revolution, not of an abstract theoretical revolution.

However, it must be owned that when the Revolution, after the abolition of feudal rights, had to make one more step to solidify its work--when it had to take such measures as would benefit the lowest classes by giving to every one the certainty of work and life--Marat did not fully grasp the truth in the ideas held by Jacques Roux, Varlet, Chalier, L'Ange, and many others. Having been himself unable to formulate the leading ideas of the deep communist change, of which these precursors sought the practical forms, and fearing, on the other hand, that France might lose the liberties she had already won, he did not give these communists the necessary support of his energy and his immense influence. He did not make himself the mouthpiece of the new movement.

"Had my brother lived," said the sister of Marat, "neither Danton, nor Camille Desmoulins"--nor the Hébertists either, we may add--"would have been guillotined."

On the whole, although Marat understood the sudden accesses of fury in the people, and even considered them necessary, at times, yet he certainly was not an upholder of terrorism as it was practiced after September 1793.

<sup>1</sup>"The civic hymn of the Bretons marching against Anarchy," such was the title of the song of the Girondins, which Gaudet gives in the *Mémoires of Buzot*, pp. 68-69. Here is one of the stanzas:

From a throne propped by his crimes, Robespierre, all drunk with blood,  
Points out his victims with his finger To the roaring Anarchist.

This Marseillaise of the Girondins demanded the death of Danton, of Pache, and of Marat. Its refrain was: War and death to the tyrants, Death to the apostles of carnage!

Of course, at the same time they themselves were demanding and preparing the slaughter of the revolutionists.

2The review of which Charlotte Corday spoke before her judges and which was to have gathered thousands of men, was a fiction, with which she expected no doubt to frighten the *sans-culottes* of Paris.

3That a plot existed, and that the Girondins were cognizant of it, seems clear enough. Thus, on July 10, a letter was read at the General Council of the Commune of Paris, received at Strasbourg, and forwarded to Paris by the mayor of that city, in which were the following lines: "The 'Mountain,' the Commune, the Jacobin Club and the whole rascally crew are a hair's-breadth from the grave.... Between now and July 15 we will dance! I hope that no other blood than that of Danton, Robespierre, Marat and Company will be shed" (I quote from Louis Blanc). On July 11 and 12, in the Girondist paper, the *Chronique de Paris*, there were already allusions to the death of Marat.

4"A divine woman, who, touched by his position when he fled from cellar to cellar, took in and hid the Friend of the People. To him she devoted her fortune and sacrificed her peace." Thus Michelet quotes the words of Albertine, Marat's sister, about Catherine Evrard.

5It is a pleasure to note that a study of Marat's work, neglected till this day, led Jaurès to speak with respect of this quality of the popular tribune.

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