# The Great Fear of 1789

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## *Rural Panic in Revolutionary France*

GEORGES LEFEBVRE

Introduction by George Rudé

Translated from the French by Joan White

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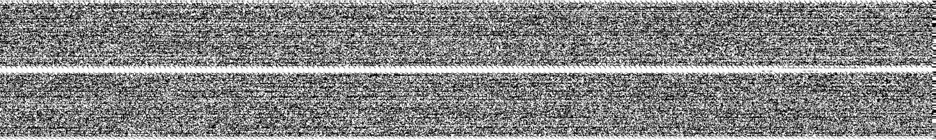

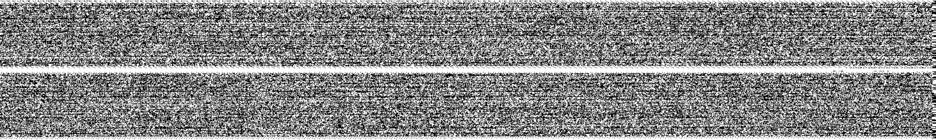

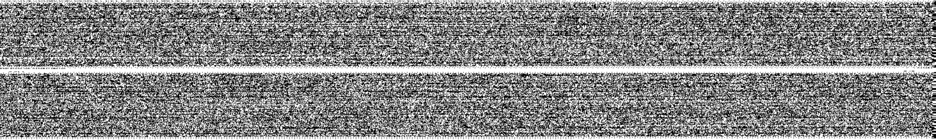

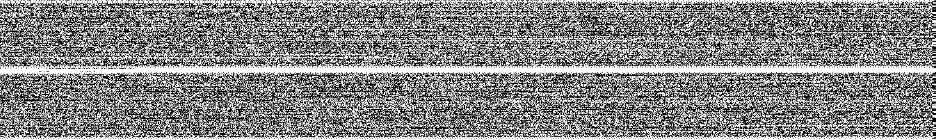

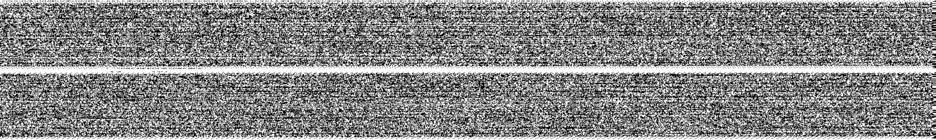

precisely, though he attributes the exemption of Brittany largely to the cool-headedness of the local authorities who refused to spread rumours and kept arms from getting into the wrong hands.

Earlier historians of the Great Fear, Lefebvre argues further, got their perspectives wrong because they failed to trace it back to its points of departure. There was no longer, as with the generalized fear with which it overlapped, a single starting-point in Paris. Now there were half-a-dozen of them, as many as there were identifiable 'currents' of the Great Fear. So at Nantes, where the first great wave of fear began on 20 July, it sprang from a rumour that a detachment of dragoons was marching on the city in the wake of the panic caused by Necker's dismissal a week before. In the East, it rose directly from the peasant revolt in the Franche-Comté. In the Clermontois, near the centre, it sprang from a fight between poachers and gamekeepers; at Ruffec, in the South-West, from a fear of beggars and vagrants on the eve of the harvest; and so on. Once launched in this way, Lefebvre continues, the Fear was transmitted by a great variety of means: by the authorities themselves, both lay and military; by well-intentioned individuals who might be peasants or priests or nobles; by postal couriers who carried it, often with remarkable speed, from one posting station to the next. The immediate reaction was almost everywhere the same: to spread a general alarm and a call to arms by the sounding of the tocsin. And from these 'original' panics (as Lefebvre calls them), there sprang 'warning' panics and from these in turn 'relay' panics, all stages in the progression of rumour and defensive reaction that carried the Fear for fifty to a hundred miles or more beyond its initial point of departure. Lefebvre sums up the progression of each of his half-dozen currents as follows: 'The Great Fear of Les Mauges and Poitou started in Nantes on the 20th; that of Maine, in the east of the province, on the 20th or 21st; the Fear in the Franche-Comté which set the entire East and South-East in a panic on the 22nd; in southern Champagne it began on the 24th; in the Clermontois and the Soissonnais on the 26th; it crossed the South-West from a starting-point in Ruffec [north of Angoulême] on the 28th; it reached Barjols in Provence on 4 August and Lourdes, at the foot of the Pyrenees, on the 6th of the same month.' And, to complicate matters further, some Fears were geographical extensions of other Fears and some cities and districts served as meeting-points for Fears that reached them from different directions. Thus Dijon was a junction for the Champagne Fear from the North and the Mâconnais Fear from the East; the Maine and Ruffec Fears, coming

respectively from north and south, met at Loches, south of Tours; Toulouse was caught in a pincer movement from north and west; while Millau, near Montpellier in the South, had the distinction of attracting 'the greatest number of currents' in the whole of France.

And from all this bewildering confusion of myth and rumour, defensive reaction and orderly and disorderly activity, Lefebvre draws the conclusion that the Great Fear was not just an interesting psychological phenomenon, underlining the idiocy and irrationality of human behaviour. On the contrary: he points to the important historical consequences to which it gave birth. It forced the towns and newly created militias to organize themselves in a more efficient and positive manner; it linked the towns and villages and thus laid the basis for the Federation of the future; and, above all, it stoked up class hatred of the nobility, which in turn, gave an impetus to the progress of the Revolution in the provinces. In one region only it precipitated, instead of being precipitated by, a *jacquerie* or peasant revolt. This was the Dauphiné, where the attack on the châteaux and manorial rolls flowed directly from the arming of the peasants to meet the 'brigands' whom the Great Fear had conjured up but who never appeared.

So rumour, panic and fear, for all their irrationality and for all the reflections they cast on the frailty of human behaviour, are presented as a new and significant dimension in the historical process. This is the first and the most important lesson we learn from this book. As Lefebvre himself puts it: 'What matters in seeking an explanation for the Great Fear is not so much the actual truth as what the people thought the aristocracy could and would do'; and it was not so much what had happened as what the townsmen and peasants believed to have happened that stirred them into feverish activity. The experience, of course, has by no means been limited to revolutionary France in the summer of 1789. The fear of brigands – though never quite assuming the proportions of the Great Fear itself – revived in the French countryside and provincial towns in the summer of 1790 and again after Louis XVI's flight to Varennes in June 1791; and it was similar fears – of both brigands and Prussian troops – that preceded the prison-massacres of September 1792; and there were further rumours of prison-plots, causing similar fears and defensive reactions (though on a far smaller scale) in the summer of 1794 and in October 1795 in Paris. So, fear and rumour were potent springs of collective behaviour that marked the whole course of the French Revolution. But not the

Revolution alone. There had been earlier panics of a similar nature in the days of the Camisards of Calvinist Languedoc towards the end of Louis XIV's reign; there were the grain riots, or *guerre des farines*, of 1775; and there was to be the cholera epidemic of 1832; and, more striking still, the succession of panics attending the Revolution of 1848. In British history, as Lefebvre himself points out, there was something similar to the Great Fear of 1789 in the little-known episode of the terrors and panics of the 'Irish Night' that followed James II's abdication, when it was widely believed that the Irish Catholic troops had landed in the West of England to assassinate the new King's Protestant subjects. There were the rumours concerning English Catholics, assuming almost panic proportions in London and the West Country, at the time of the Gordon Riots of 1780. And in the 'Swing' riots in the English southern counties in 1830 rumour again played a potent role in stimulating the labourers to revolt. [Here there were also some remarkable similarities with the French peasant revolt of 1789: the same faith in the King as protector; the exaction of payment for services rendered; the appeal to traditional 'justice'; and rumours that mysterious 'strangers' were riding around in gigs.]

So far, however, historians have done comparatively little to explore such phenomena and to apply to their investigations the methods of Georges Lefebvre. In the first twenty years after this book's original appearance it would be hard to find any sign that, beyond a small group of dedicated Revolutionary scholars, it had had any influence at all. There have been some, though all too few, developments since. In 1951 and 1952, René Baehrel, a Frenchman, wrote two pieces on epidemics and terror in which rumours of the poisoning of wells and contamination of food by the rich stirred up violent expressions of class hatred among the poor. In 1958, a similar theme was handled by Louis Chevalier and a team of French and English scholars who studied the cholera epidemic in England, France and Russia in 1832. The same year (1958), Michel Vovelle published an article on the food riots that broke out in the Beauce in successive waves in 1792; and, before this, I had myself published the first of two pieces on the French grain riots, which invaded Paris and Versailles and spread through half-a-dozen adjoining provinces in the early summer of 1775. Here again, there were remarkable similarities with the peasant rebellion and small consumers' movement of 1789: a similar pattern of rumour, carried (in this case) from village to village and market to market; the same absence of any concerted plan or organization as of any

'conspiracy' hatched from outside; the same conviction that the King was on the rioters' side and approved what they were doing to bring down the price of bread and flour. And it was by asking similar questions and by applying similar methods to a broadly similar situation that Eric Hobsbawm and I attempted to throw new light on the English farm labourers' rebellion of 1830.*

But such work is, of course, only a beginning in exploring a territory that to all intents and purposes still lies largely unexplored. So, broadly, the challenge offered by this book to historians and social scientists is one that still has to be taken up. If they do so, they will find it is not enough to rely on the old traditional methods of either history or the social sciences – and least of all on the arid abstractions of the 'structuralists' or the antiquated crowd-psychology of Le Bon and his followers, which dismiss rioters without discrimination as 'mobs' and see 'conspiracy' round every corner. Statistical methods certainly have their place; and the much-abused computer may, in such cases, serve as an excellent tool for classifying, correlating, enumerating and bringing order to material which, if voluminous enough, may easily get out of hand. Moreover, the techniques of the geographer may be indispensable for plotting the topography of a complex movement and might, even in the present instance, have helped to answer more convincingly such questions as to why the Great Fear struck some districts and not others. So the historian of similar movements requires such help as he can get from his colleagues in the other social sciences. But, equally, there can be no substitute for the intense industry and patient zeal of the professional historian, which enables him (as Lefebvre does here) to chart in precise detail the course of a movement by noting the days, and even the hours, of its appearance: by such means alone can the old bogey of rampaging 'mobs' and ubiquitous 'conspiracies' be laid to rest, or at least be reduced to proper historical proportions. Let

* R. Baehrel, 'Épidémie et terreur: histoire et sociologie', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, XXIII, 1951; 'La haine de classes en temps d'épidémie', *Annales*, VII, 1952. L. Chevalier *et al.*, *Le choléra. La première épidémie du XIXe siècle*, La Roche-sur-Yon, 1958. M. Vovelle, 'Les taxations populaires de février–mars et novembre–décembre 1792 dans la Beauce et sur ses confins', *Mémoirs et documents*, no. XIII, Paris, 1958. G. Rudé, 'La taxation populaire de mai 1775 à Paris et dans la région parisienne', *Annales historique de la Révolution française*, no. 143, April–June 1956, 139–79; 'La taxation populaire de mai 1775 en Picardie, en Normandie et dans le Beauvaisis', ibid., no. 165, July–September 1961, 305–26. E. J. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing*, London and New York, 1969.

us therefore hope that the appearance of this book in an English-language edition will encourage English-speaking historians to learn its lessons and apply similar methods of inquiry to episodes in their national history that have been neglected in the past.

George Rudé
Montreal, 1972

# Foreword

The Great Fear of 1789 is an astonishing event whose outer form has often been described, but whose inner motives have never been the subject of a thorough investigation. To its disconcerted contemporaries it was a total mystery, and those who insisted on finding some sort of explanation for it had to fall back on the idea of a conspiracy, which they attributed either to the aristocracy or to the revolutionaries, depending on their own political opinions. Since the revolutionary party had most to gain from the event, the theory of a plot hatched by the Third Estate has proved the longest-lived and indeed still has its partisans. Taine, who had a sense for social history, discerned some of the events which caused the panics, but he used them only to explain the popular uprisings.

Historians of considerable merit have studied the Great Fear – M. Conard for the Dauphiné, Miss Pickford for Touraine and Provence, M. Chaudron for southern Champagne and M. Dubreuil for Évreux – but they have described the progress and the effects of the panic rather than its origins, and indeed in most areas it came into the province from outside; to trace the current of panic right back to its starting point would entail a different study entirely and could only distract the writer from the chosen subject of his monograph.

Existing studies are therefore incomplete, though of course as far as they go they are most methodically prepared. Unfortunately there are still all too few of them. It might be claimed – not inappropriately perhaps – that the time is not yet ripe for a comprehensive study, but it is surely not unwise to take one's bearings, for indicating the problems to be solved and suggesting their possible solutions must necessarily encourage further research in this field.

There were too many gaps in the available source material for me to restrict my research to the very few studies and documents that have been published. This present work contains a certain amount of new

information that has come to light through my researches in the Archives Nationales, the archives at the War Ministry and the Foreign Office and the various local archives in the many *départements* and *communes* I have visited over the last few years: I have also found much material in the Bibliothèque Nationale and various provincial libraries. These archives are not always properly catalogued and the documents are often scattered; the Bibliothèque Nationale is far from possessing every available local history: moreover, though my research has been lengthy, it has even so been limited and there must surely be a wealth of information still to be discovered. I hope however that my contribution in this field will be of value and I am glad to be able to offer my thanks to all the archivists and librarians as well as their colleagues who have willingly helped me in my work; I also wish to thank the many people who have passed documents on to me for my information and am most particularly grateful to the following: Commandant Klippfel in Metz; M. Caron, archivist at the Archives Nationales; M. Porée, archivist for the Yonne *département*; M. Duhem, archivist for the Aube; M. Morel, archivist for the Ain; M. Hubert, archivist for the Seine-et-Marne; M. Évrard, librarian at the Institut de Géographie, Paris University; M. Dubois, Emeritus Professor at Confrançon (Ain); M. Jacob, the Lycée Janson-de-Sailly; M. Lesourd, the Roanne *lycée*; M. Millot, the Sarreguemines *lycée*; M. Mauve, the École Normale in Moulins. I much regret that it has not been possible in this edition to provide a critical apparatus or a detailed bibliography, but I hope one day to be able to publish the documents I have collected, together with the appropriate commentaries.

In the course of my researches, I began by reconstructing the currents of the Great Fear, indicating its secondary causes as I went along; I finished by going right back to their starting points and I then endeavoured to reveal their general causes. At this point, however, I wanted to produce a synthesis, not write a detailed textbook, and so in the account which follows I have travelled in the reverse direction. To reach the origins of the Great Fear, I have had to go back to the early days of 1789, but in looking yet again at the events of this period, I have tried to view them from the popular standpoint and I have assumed a knowledge of parliamentary history and contemporary events in Paris. It will surely seem right and proper that in seeking to explain the Great Fear I should try to set myself amongst those who experienced it the most fully.

# Glossary

| | |
|---|---|
| *ateliers de charité* | Workshops set up by the state to provide work for the unemployed. |
| *bailliage* | Administrative area comparable to the medieval bailliwick. |
| *cahiers de doléance* | The list of grievances drawn up by each of the three orders for presentation to the Estates-General. |
| *fermiers-généraux* | A group of financiers who in return for a special lease or bail (*ferme*) collected the indirect taxes and the income from the royal domains and royal monopolies. The *directeur des fermes* was the local agent concerned with this system of tax collection and the *bureaux des fermes* were the offices responsible for its administration. |
| *intendant* | An official in charge of one of the thirty-four *généralités* into which France was divided in 1789. |
| *justice prévôtale* | Military courts set up to deal summarily with local offences. |
| *laboureur* | A wealthy farmer, usually a figure of some importance in the village community and not to be confused with the *petits propriétaires* (small-holders), *métayers* (share-croppers) or *journaliers* (day-labourers). |
| *maréchaussée* | Mounted constabulary used to police the countryside. |
| *procureur du roi* | Special prosecutor attached to all the more important judicial bodies, sometimes translated as 'public prosecutor'. |
| *procureur-syndic* | The *procureur*'s deputy, a government official usually appointed by the local municipality. |
| *sénéchaussée* | A judicial area, possibly best rendered by 'magistracy'. |
| *sub-délégué* | Usually the local government agent. |

1. The Currents of the Great Fear

# Part I

# The Countryside in 1789

# I

# Hunger

'The people,' writes Taine in his *Ancien Régime*, 'are like a man walking in a pond with water up to his mouth: the slightest dip in the ground, the slightest ripple, makes him lose his footing – he sinks and chokes.' His description of the common people may be summary, but his conclusion is nevertheless valid. On the eve of the Revolution, hunger was the great enemy for the majority of Frenchmen.

No one has disputed the fact that in the towns, the workers, the urban *canaille*, lived in appalling poverty. In Paris and every other major city, their agitation at the slightest increase in bread prices caused grave concern to the authorities. The better-off earned from thirty to forty sous; when bread cost more than two sous a pound, there was unrest in those gloomy slums where they lived and which still survive in some French cities. As well as tradespeople and craftsmen, there was a vast floating population of unskilled workers and porters, a reserve army doomed to unemployment and swollen at the slightest crisis by crowds of vagrants and out-of-work labourers from the country.

What has been disputed is Taine's judgement on the countryside, where most outbreaks of the Great Fear started. Even his closest admirers have raised objections: that there were already many small landowners in 1789, that the peasants were by no means as poor as they made out and that the *cahiers de doléance** drawn up for the Estates-General were not to be trusted. 'A pretended poverty,' it was said recently, 'and behind the outer rags, a peaceful life, often comfortable, sometimes even affluent.' In point of fact, the studies of the *cahiers* which have been going on since 1900 have proved their accuracy, and detailed researches into the condition of the rural population now show Taine to be perfectly correct.

It is true that in 1789 the peasants owned a sizeable proportion of the land, possibly as much as a third. But this proportion varied considerably

* See Glossary on page 3 for specialized terminology not translated.

from region to region and even from parish to parish. In the Limousin, around Sens and in the south of maritime Flanders, it was about a half; only just over a quarter in the Cambrésis and just under around Toulouse. It was often less than a tenth or even a twentieth around the big towns – around Versailles, for instance – and in the forest, moorland and marshy regions.

As the country areas were much more densely populated than they are today, there were many families who owned nothing, not even their cottages or their gardens: this was the case for the Cambrésis and around Tulle where one in five owned nothing; it was one in four in the Orléannais; the proportion rose to two-fifths in the Normandy Bocage and to three-quarters in certain parts of Flanders and around Versailles where there was a rapidly increasing rural proletariat. As for the peasant landowners, their holding was usually extremely small; out of every hundred, 58 in the Limousin and 76 in the Laon area owned no more than five arpents, which makes less than two hectares; in what was to become the Nord *département*, 75 owned less that a hectare. This was not enough to feed a family.

The agrarian crisis would have been acute indeed if the farming system had not been far more favourable to the peasants than anywhere else in Europe. There were few priests, nobles or bourgeois who troubled to exploit their lands themselves. Unlike the country gentlemen of central and eastern Europe who could call on vast numbers of serfs for forced labour, the French upper classes leased out their land like English landlords; but whilst in England farming was carried out on a large-scale basis, here in France there were farms of every size, from estates comprising several hundred hectares to small-holdings, share-holdings and tiny tenancies only a few poles in area; most of these were farmed by poor share-croppers; many plots were even rented out individually so that journeymen could lease one small patch of field or meadow and small landowners could find a means to round off their property. In this way, the number of those who had nothing to farm was reduced, often to a considerable extent. But even if the problem was lessened, it was by no means completely solved, for the great majority of these farms were not able to support a family either: in the North, 60 to 70 out of every 100 held less than one hectare and 20 to 25 had less than five.

The situation grew worse and worse because the population increased steadily except in a few areas like inland Brittany which was ravaged by

epidemics. Between 1770 and 1790, France seems to have acquired an additional two million inhabitants. 'The number of our children plunges us into despair,' the villagers of La Caure in the Châlons *bailliage* wrote in their *cahiers de doléance*, 'we do not have the means to feed or clothe them; many of us have eight and nine children.' The number of peasants who held no land, neither by freehold nor leasehold, thus increased and as from this time onwards land owned by commoners was frequently divided among the heirs at the death of the owner, rural holdings were split up into smaller and smaller units. In Lorraine, the *cahiers* often indicate that the *laboureurs*, i.e. peasants working an average-sized farm, were growing fewer in number. At the end of the *ancien régime*, people everywhere were searching for land; the poor took over the common land, overran forests, open country and the borders of marshland; they complained about the privileged classes who used bailiffs and foremen to farm their land; they demanded the sale or even the free distribution of the king's estates and sometimes of the clergy's property too; there was a very strong movement against the existence of the great estates, for their division into small lots would have provided work for many families.

All men who had no land of their own needed work; all those who did not have enough land to support them needed additional income. Where could this be found? Those with either initiative or luck became merchants or craftsmen. In some villages and more especially in the small towns, there were millers, inn-keepers and tavern-keepers, egg merchants, seedsmen or corn-chandlers; there were distillers in the South and the Centre, brewers in the North; tanners were less common, but cartwrights, harness-makers, farriers and clog-makers more frequent. Building works provided employment for some, as did quarries, brickworks and tileries. But the vast majority was reduced to seeking for work on the great estates: the *cahiers* of seven parishes in the Vic *bailliage* in Lorraine show that there were 82 labourers for every 100 head of population; there were 64 in every 100 in the *bailliage* of Troyes. Except at harvest-time and grape-gathering, there was no readily available work; in winter, only a few beaters were taken on and almost every labourer was out of work. Wages were therefore very low and lagged very far behind food prices which rose constantly in the years before the Revolution. It was only when the harvest was actually ready that they could try to force the masters' hand; then there were frequent clashes, especially around Paris,