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- [French Revolution](#)
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- [Topics](#)
- [Concept maps](#)
- [Documents](#)
- [Graphics](#)
- [Video clips](#)
- [Glossary](#)
- [Timelines](#)
- [Quotations](#)
- [Who's Who A-K](#)
- [Who's Who L-Z](#)
- [Historiography](#)
- [Essay questions](#)
- [Trivia](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Apps](#)

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- [American Revolution](#)
- [World War I](#)
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The Day of Daggers



A stylised portrait of the Marquis de Lafayette

The 'Day of Daggers' is a lesser-known event of 1791 but one that shows the heightened tensions between royalists and the crowd, with the moderate Lafayette and his National Guard caught in the middle. It came after months of economic deprivation both in Paris (where the real value of wages tumbled throughout 1790-91) and in rural areas, where the harvests continued to be poor. The king remained an unpopular figure in the city and many believed that he would soon abscond to join the emigres – or, worse, that there would be a royalist counter-revolution. Many of these rumours revolved around an underground tunnel linking the Tuileries with a fortress in Vincennes, a suburb of Paris; there were constant rumours that the king would use this tunnel to make his escape and join with the emigres to launch a counter-revolutionary campaign. Crowds gathered outside the Tuileries daily and called out insults and threats against the king. Conservatives, royalists and emigres feared for the safety of the royal family.

“Up to this time I had been able to find reasons for the King's gentleness. But this was not gentle; it was weak. From that hour I pitied him, beset by situations for which nature had made him unequal. Then or never was the time for grape-shot. Then and only then did my heart turn against the populace. For once I wished I might be in command of the thirty cannon that were parked in the courtyard... Some slaughter would have been necessary, but it would have been a slaughter of criminals.”

John Paul Jones, US admiral

These tensions were bound to end in confrontation and this finally occurred on February 28th, 1791. While Lafayette and the National Guard were busy dealing with unrest elsewhere in Paris, about 400 aristocrats and royal sympathisers marched on the Tuileries, determined to protect the king. Some possessed guns but most had swords or knives, hence the name of this event. The group encircled the Tuileries Palace and confronted a small number of people there. The citizens of Paris, on hearing the news of this assembly, immediately feared a potential counter-revolution and made their way to the scene. Lafayette and the National Guard arrived at the Tuileries and, after some heated moments, disarmed and arrested the 400 aristocrats as well as many in the growing crowd. This action caused Lafayette no joy however, and after suppressing another revolt several weeks later he attempted to resign his commission (he was eventually persuaded not to). Though not a significant event in its own right, the 'Day of Daggers' shows the potential for violence and confrontation during the tense days of 1791. It also reveals the growing difficulties faced by Lafayette and the National Guard in attempting to keep order, as well as Lafayette's concerns about the path the revolution was taking.

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