

THE BURNING OF SPEYER

Von Rollingen

Kirrweiler, 15 June 1689

As I was returning to Speyer from Kirrweiler on the twenty-third of May of this year (1689) at about five o'clock in the afternoon, I guessed from the conduct and disturbed faces of the citizens that some terrible news had arrived. Two or three of the burgomasters and the town scribe, Wegelaz, came to me to say that about an hour before, the French intendant of war, M. la Fond, had arrived and summoned the chief magistrates and fifteen leading citizens to listen to certain royal commands. To those that assembled he read the following:

“The interests of his royal Majesty, owing to existing conditions, demand that this town be entirely evacuated within six days. Not only must all wines, provisions, furniture, and other effects be removed, but everybody, whether laymen or clergy, must leave and take refuge somewhere on this side the Rhine or in Philippsburg. These orders are not the result of his royal Majesty's fear of his enemies, nor has he any grudge against the town, but is well satisfied with its conduct hitherto. Accordingly you need not conclude that the town is to be burned. It is necessary, nevertheless, in order to deprive his enemies of all means of subsistence, to have the town evacuated. You must accordingly transmit this royal command to all the citizens and clergy and order its execution, for everything that remains in the town after the expiration of the term set, shall fall to the king and his soldiers.”

All remonstrances and pleading were vain, the city scribe translated the order into German, and the citizens could find their only consolation in the promise that the town should not be burned. They pleaded for more time, but were told that it was useless to apply to the king or Marshal Duras, that they must set to work to remove their goods by means of the hundred carts which they had, and that they could store the goods, which could not be removed within the time fixed, in the cathedral, where everything would be safe.

When the clergy, the Jesuits and members of the four mendicant orders, appealed to the French officers, they were received with words of sympathy and compassion, but no hope was given. The boys and girls, dressed in white, marched in procession to the intendant and general and besought him vainly for mercy on the town. The officers declared that their orders came from the court at Versailles and that they could not make any concessions.

In the meantime there was much talk of further delay, when on the morning of the twenty-seventh, between ten and eleven o'clock, General Montclair announced that he had received orders to set fire to the town, churches, and cloisters, with the single exception of the cathedral. On May 31, at six in the afternoon, the destruction began as it did at Worms. The fire was started by the Weidenberg and spread gradually—for it was a still evening—through the fish market. There was an old man in the upper story of the bell ringer's house who was miserably burned to death, whether he could not or would not make his escape.

On June 1 the fire caught the houses in the market place and progressed towards the church of St. James and the Horse Market. About ten o'clock a fearful thunderstorm and wind arose which spread the fire with terrible rapidity, so that in an instant it was raging in the Herdgasse, and reached the White Tower. Between eleven and twelve it enveloped the Wolzhausen and the whole neighborhood, for the wind scattered a shower of sparks everywhere, and so it came about that the bell tower of the cathedral was set on fire. This was extinguished no less than three times, but the cloisters were ignited by incendiaries and the near-by buildings caught.

A little flame was then discovered in the tower over the choir. Every effort was made to put it out, but the strong wind, dry wood, and the danger from the stream of molten lead from the burning roof combined to permit the fire to get the upper hand. When I saw that the cathedral was in the utmost danger I tried to save the miracle-working figure of the Virgin, but the shower of lead and the thick smoke prevented. Seeing that nothing could be done, I mounted my horse and rode into the suburb of the Carmelites. Here I appealed to the general who had received me with so much sympathy before, to place guards at the doors of the cathedral to prevent plundering.

On June 3 I sent my servants to inspect the cathedral. They found the miracle-working Virgin quite uninjured and brought it thither. We placed it in the church here. It is remarkable that even the artificial flowers which adorned it

were not harmed, although one of the doors of the shrine, which I had carefully shut upon my last visit, was burnt for several inches.

On the fifth, I learned that an order had arrived to mine and blow up the towers of the cathedral as well as the buildings attached. I went immediately to Marshal Duras at Odenheim to get the order countermanded, and succeeded finally. I wished then to see with my own eyes the ruin of the noble building, and found it, alas, in a worse state than had been reported to me. The vaulting of the nave had wholly collapsed, the building full of rubbish; and chairs, altars, and everything that had been stored there was reduced to ashes. The sacristy and other portions that had escaped the fire had been plundered. The deacon vom Weideberg had gone into the sacristy as soon as he durst, to see if the body of Saint Guido was still there. He found the receptacle broken open and the holy head of the saint stolen on account of its silver crown. The rest of the saint's body he brought to a place of safety. In the choir, moreover, several of the emperors' tombs had been opened; the epitaphs, inscriptions, and everything that looked like metal had been taken and a number of the statues themselves mutilated.

James Harvey Robinson and Charles A. Beard, *Readings in Modern European History*, (New York: 1908), I:33–35.