Larzabal

Fusillade on the Boulevard

On the night of the 23rd of February of 1848 the city of Paris was in a state of upheaval. The citizens of Paris, along with National Guard members, took to the streets to protest Guizot and seek reformation. The army felt content to allow the protests and marches to ensue, due to their peaceful nature, but outside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs tragedy occurred. The fusillade on the boulevard was mainly the fault of Lieutenant-Colonel Courant, who demonstrated a lack of control, a lack of authority, and failed to warn the mob of his intent. This failure ended in the otherwise avoidable death of many Parisian citizens.

Lieutenant-Colonel Courant was not able to maintain control over the situation. From the start, he attempted to talk to the mob and convince them to turn back. Even though he talked for about forty five minutes, he was not able to convince them fully. He himself admits that the mob was waving fists right in his face and grabbing his horse. A few moments later, the lieutenant-colonel falls of his horse and completely loses any control that he might have still had. This failure was clearly his fault, since he was the senior ranking officer in the vicinity of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Equally important, Courant did not approach the mob before it reached his line of troops, which might have prevented such close contact and so much confusion between the army and the crowd.

Courant’s authority was not respected. Instead of coming off as an imposing figure that demanded the highest respect and compliance, Courant was waved aside and seen as a small obstacle towards reform. He alone in front of the army was clearly not enough to stop the mob. The National Guard members, like Neveu and Schumacher, were willing to talk to him, but they were not fearful enough to turn around immediately and leave. Courant also lost authority within his own army. As soon as the first shot was fired, Courant could not stop anything further from happening. Instead, several more rounds were fired at the crowd while the Lieutenant-colonel was on the ground and unable to take command. A man with true authority and power would have been able to hold back his troops if that is what he wanted to do. This leads to the conclusion that Courant did order the firing because otherwise the troops would not have fired at all, being professional soldiers that were already hesitant about engaging their fellow citizens. The regular army was well trained and had some experience, evidenced by the firing style they employed during the fusillade.

Finally, Lieutenant-Colonel Courant did not warn the mob of his intent to prepare and possibly use arms. This was the greatest reproach from most of the testimonies. All the eyewitness accounts agree that Courant never told the mob that he was willing to use weapons in order to disperse them. Since this was a peaceful crowd until that moment, and they were all French citizens, it was Courant’s duty to give them one last chance by warning them of his intent. If after such a warning the mob would have persisted with its march, then it would have been much more justifiable to fire upon them. Courant never issued any such warning. He went straight from talking to the mob to shouting the order to charge bayonets. This order caused panic and most likely caused the first shot, which unleashed a whole chain reaction that is well documented.

Lieutenant-Colonel Courant was to blame for the fusillade on the boulevard because he did not have enough control, enough authority and most of all he did not warn the crowd of his intent. The first shot itself is not the most important factor in laying the fault. Several events and mistakes led up to that first shot, which then set off a whole barrage of shots that killed one soldier and several dozen citizens. With more leadership and control, the whole situation might have been avoided altogether.