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Who Fired the First Shot?

The French Revolution of 1848 would kick off after the events that took place on February 23, 1848 in Paris, France. A group of citizens and French national guardsmen would march to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in an attempt to remove Francois Guizot from his position of power. In an attempt to keep the group from making it to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs building, the French regular army dispatched the 14th Regiment of the Line to defend the Boulevard des Capucines. A request was made for the group to be able to march through and continue their march on the Boulevard des Capucines, but Lt. Colonel Courant was required to refuse their request for passage. Tempers began to rise, and fear began to set in as both the army and crowd were beginning to get antsy. After a single initial shot, more gunshots were fired between both the crowd and regular army. The first shot was fired by an unknown member of the crowd who had targeted Lt. Colonel Courant with his pistol.

Percy B. Saint John, an American, begins telling a summary of the events that occurred on February 22 and 23 of 1848. One of the crucial claims made by Saint John is that of an armory being sacked, but the only weapons taken were swords and pistols. He also states that on the 22nd of February he saw workingmen with pistols concealed under their blouses. Saint John explained that many people were interviewed. The first critical interview proving that Lt. Colonel Courant was shot at by a member of the crowd was by Colonel Courant himself.

Lt. Colonel Courant was the commanding officer of the 14th Regiment of the Line. In his statement Courant gives the reader the first view of what happened on February 23. Colonel Courant explains that a mob of citizens led by the French national guard had marched up to the 14th Regiment of the Line. Courant explained to the mob that he could not allow them to pass, and it was at this time that a man in the front of the mob grasped the bridle of Colonel Courant’s horse. It was after this that Lt. Colonel Courant retreated and said, “Grenadiers charge bayonets!” When this statement was made, Courant explains that a shot rang out, but it had not come from his men because he had not given the order to fire. Courant conveys to the reader that only one man from his squad was killed. Sergeant Giacomoni elaborates more on the identity of the man who was killed.

Sergeant Giacomoni was also a member of the 14th Regiment of the Line and he explains to his audience the identity of the soldier who was killed. Sergeant Giacomoni was located in the front near the middle of the blockade which places him close to where the shot was fired. Several of the members at the front of the mob were carrying rifles or side arms according to Giacomoni. The Sergeant confirms that Courant was “surrounded and jostled” and that Courant retreated while giving the orders to charge bayonets. It was after Courant retreated that Giacomoni states, “During the execution of this order I saw a man who was part of the crowd raise a pistol and aim it at the colonel: the shot rang out and struck rifleman Henri full in the face”. Giacomoni goes on to add that rifleman Henri was near where the ranks opened to allow Courant to retreat.

Jean Neveu was a member of the national guard who was located near Colonel Courant. He says that he placed his hand on the Lt. Colonel’s horse and it caused the horse to turn around. Neveu says that he never heard the Colonel tell the army to fire. He did state that whenever the shots rang out, the bayonets were charged and the soldiers had not readied their weapons. Neveu never states that he heard a single initial shot like the others had. The next interview is with Pannier-Lafontaine, and he solidifies a crucial piece of evidence.

One of the last statements given was by Pannier-Lafontaine, who was a member of the mob. Lafontaine could hear the shouts going on at the front. It was at this point that Lafontaine agrees that he heard the Colonel shout “Charge bayonets.” This is crucial because both members of the army and the crowd are agreeing that the Colonel had his men charge bayonets. This is crucial evidence because the soldier’s never would have fired the first shot from a charged position. The only reason shots did come from the regular army was because the members of the mob attacked them after hearing the first shot. During the fighting for the army’s weapons, the soldier’s guns were going off from the charged position.

Each of the men in these interviews had given their view of what had happened on February 23, 1848. After taking the best evidence from both sides, it is safe to say that an unknown member of the mob had fired the first shot and killed Rifleman Henri in an attempt to kill Colonel Courant. The army also fired their rifles, but this was only after the mob had tried to grab a hold of their weapons. There will continue to be a dispute as to what actually happened, but after following the evidence given in the interviews, it is clear that a member of the mob shot at Lt. Colonel Courant which initiated the frenzy of gunfire.