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The Survival of the Royal Hunt in France: from Louis XVI to Napoleon III.

Since the days of the Pharaohs, hunting has been an essential activity of courts. Hunting was both a pleasure, and a way of gathering game for the royal table. Once one area was hunted out, the court moved on to the next. In many different monarchies hunting became an obsession, with its own music, dress and flamboyant rituals. One Chinese prince said: «I would rather not eat for three days than not hunt for one»¹.

Hunting was so important that it could decide where the court resided. The proximity of hunting forests was one reason for the choice, as a royal residence, of Windsor, Versailles, Stupinigi, Hubertusberg, and many other sites. Conversely, the choice of these sites as royal residences ensured that the surrounding forests were well maintained. The landscape of the Ile de France is still dominated by the royal hunting forests of Versailles, Marly, Saint-Germain, Compiègne, Vincennes, Fontainebleau, and Rambouillet.

In addition to the pleasure and food it provided, hunting could also acquire a political and hierarchical function. Hunting was a visible assertion of domination over the land and the animal kingdom. It also protected the ruler's subjects and their herds from boar, wolves and other vermin. The stag was the noblest beast, hunting it the noblest sport. Furthermore hunting was believed to be a school of war, masculinity and horsemanship. It taught courage, comprehension of landscape, and the art of the cavalry charge. In l'Ecole de Cavalerie of 1751, Robichon de La Guerroniere described hunting:

«it is the pastime which Kings and Princes prefer to all others. This inclination is no doubt based on the conformity existing between hunting and war. In both, in effect, there is an object to tame, hardships to endure, dangers to avoid and tricks to practice»².

Even in the twentieth century hunting continued to be regarded, by some generals, as 'the continuation of a cavalry charge by other means'. Indeed hunting horses were often used by cavalry regiments. As late as 1939, on joining the Grenadier Guards, Lord Carrington was told: 'you are to hunt in Leicestershire two days a week'³. The link between hunting and warfare was not, however, universal. Some royal hunters like James I or Louis XVI, had disliked war, while some royal warriors, like Frederick II of Prussia, disliked hunting.

There was a further reason for the popularity of royal hunts, in addition to the thrill of the chase, the assertion of sovereignty, and their appeal as a school of war. The fourth reason was a court's need for mass entertainment. Royal hunts, as many cycles of pictures commissioned by monarchs prove⁴,

¹ THOMAS T. ALLSEN, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press 2006, p. 194.

² DANIEL REYTIER, *Voyage au Coeur des chasses de Louis XV*, in *A cheval! Ecuyers, amazones et cavaliers du XIVE au XXIE siecle*, sous la direction de Daniel Roche, Daniel Reytier, Nicole de Blomac, Michel Constantini, Paris, Association pour l'Académie d'art équestre de Versailles 2007, p. 115.

³ ADAM NICOLSON, *The Gentry: stories of the English*, London, HarperPress 2011, pp. 398-9; JANE RIDLEY, *Fox-hunting*, London, William Collins Sons & Co, Ltd 1990, pp 101-2 , 110, 114.

⁴ For example the 1730's pictures by Oudry of the hunts of Louis XV; the 1770-4 cycles by Cignaroli at Stupinigi and Racconigi, outside Turin, of the Piedmontese royal hunts; and the many pictures of the hunts of Ferdinand IV of Naples from the 1780's and 1790's by T. P. Hackert.

occupied large numbers of people and vast stretches of land, acquainting subjects with their rulers, and vice versa. They required guards; hunt servants; musicians (royal hunts were always accompanied by music); dog-keepers; beaters; the monarch and his companions; and spectators. Hunts were a form of mass sociability which became the rural equivalent of a court ball or royal opera: a means of serving the king's pleasure and advertising his power. Royal hunts became so large and so frequent that they could change landscapes, road-networks, animal breeds (leading to the development or import of new breeds of horses and hounds for hunting), food supplies and, as John Christianson has written in an article describing Frederik II of Denmark (1559-88)'s transformation of his kingdom in the interests of his royal hunt, 'the entire balance between the natural and human worlds'⁵.

No dynasty hunted so obsessively as the House of France. In France all hunting rights, in theory, were granted by the King⁶. Some of the great royal palaces, such as Saint Germain, Chambord and Versailles itself began as hunting-lodges⁷. To show his displeasure with the Paris Parlement, during a political crisis the King sometimes addressed it in boots and hunting dress: Louis XIV in 1655 and 1673, Louis XV in 1755 and 1768⁸. The 'messe de Saint Hubert', in honour of the patron saint of hunting, was an annual court ritual, when priests blessed the hounds in the presence of the King and the Royal Family. Hunting was so closely linked to court life that one stage in a man's formal presentation to the King was permission to follow the royal hunt, wearing its blue uniform⁹. Until its suspension for reasons of economy in 1786, the court's annual autumn visit to Fontainebleau was primarily to enjoy the hunting in the surrounding forest.

The hunt was an important department of the King's household. Under Louis XV there were about 100 staff and 200 horses under the Grand Veneur, the King's cousin the duc de Penthièvre (although he himself disliked hunting)¹⁰. Versailles was a city of hounds, kennels and game parks, as well as horses, carriages and stables. Including the packs of the King's relations, there may have been 400 hounds kennelled at Versailles in 1700, and even more in other chateaux near-by¹¹.

Louis XIV had hunted and shot obsessively, even in old age. He went shooting or hunting on 182 days in 1689; 138 in 1707 and 118 in 1708. When he had gout, he went shooting in a sedan chair carried by four men¹². Louis XV was also a hunting addict. The most passionate Bourbon hunter of all was Louis XVI. Louis XVI had over 2,200 horses in his stables compared to Louis XIV's 700. His diaries are in effect game books, more eloquent and detailed about hunting than politics. They show that between 1775 and 1791 he took or shot 1,274 stags and a total of 189,251 other heads of game¹³. Another of his hunting diaries – not in the Archives Nationales but sold at Sotheby's

⁵ JOHN ROBERT CHRISTIANSON, *The Hunt of Frederik II of Denmark: Structures and Rituals*, in «The Court Historian, Royal Hunts Issue», XVIII, II, December 2013, pp. 165-187, p. 169.

⁶ REYTIER, 2007, p. 128.

⁷ PHILIPPE SALVADORI, *La chasse sous l'ancien régime*, Paris, Librairie Arthème Fayard 1996, pp 210-2.

⁸ PHILIP MANSEL, *Dressed to Rule: Royal and Court Costume from Louis XIV to Elizabeth III*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2005, p. 57.

⁹ SALVADORI, 1996, pp. 204-5, 226; Mansel pp.

¹⁰ JEAN DUMA, *Les Bourbon Penthièvre: une nébuleuse aristocratique au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne 1995, pp. 121 - 4.

¹¹ SALVADORI, 1996, pp. 89, 198.

¹² SALVADORI, 1996, pp. 202-3.

¹³ SALVADORI, 1996, pp. 207-208.

Monaco in 1987 - records: Recapitulation de l'Annee 1789 Cerfs pris 89; chasses 58; manques 4. Even in that year of crisis he went hunting about six or seven times a month. It is a meticulous register of the timing, routes, and score of his hunts, and of the lives of favourite hunt servants like Caqueray and Pierre Flocard¹⁴. After the renunciation of privileges on 4 August 1789, royal forests were devastated. It was the 'Saint Barholomew's Eve of rabbits'¹⁵. The interruption of the pleasures of the hunt by the politics of Paris was recorded in Louis XVI's agenda: '5 october shot at the gate of Chatillon, killed 81 pieces, interrupted by events, went and returned on horseback. 6 departure for Paris at half past midday, visit the Hotel de Ville, supper and slept at the Tuileries'. Although he continued to go riding in his hunting forests, he never hunted again. A silent but eloquent protest against his imprisonment in Paris¹⁶. So closely associated were the King and the hunt that one reason why people felt he did not freely support the Revolution, on a level with the absence of the royal guard of Gardes du Corps, as La Fayette admitted, was that he no longer went hunting¹⁷. In September 1790, despite the relatively peaceful political situation, the King abolished the royal hunt - although huntsmen continued to be paid - perhaps indicating tht he hoped to resume hunting in happier times¹⁸. In October 1791, in the euphoria after the King's acceptance of the constitution, an English visitor recorded, with more optimism than accuracy, that the King 'goes hunting without interruption'. In reality his continued refusal proved his distaste for the revolution¹⁹.

The reign of terror killed animals as well as humans. Game was poached on a massive scale. Boar and wolves flourished. Finally, on 17 July 1804, at the same time as a dynasty and a court, Napoleon I recreated a royal hunt. The combination of rupture and continuity characteristic of nineteenth-century French monarchies is shown by his choice of Grand Veneur. Marshal Berthier was not only his chief of staff and Grand Veneur but also son of a royal official at Versailles, who had drawn and published a famous map of the royal hunting forests in 1764-73. Berthier completed his father's map in 1807 and is pointing to it in his portrait as Grand Veneur, in 'grand costume', which hung in the palace of Compiègne. The revolution, far from extinguishin court life, had increased French appetite for it. The Court not only fought back, to regain power and privilege: it hunted back.

Under Berthier, the main organiser of Napoleon's hunts was a brilliant professional officer, Berthier's ADC Alexandre de Girardin. Before 1799 he had also organised the hunts of the director Barras at Grosbois²⁰. Secretaire de la venerie in 1804, he became Lieutenant de la venerie in 1807²¹.

¹⁴ Louis Nicolardot (ed.), *Journal de Louis XVI*, Paris, E. Dentu libraire-Éditeur 1873, pp. 113, 153, 164, 168; Sothebys Monaco, sale 28 February 1987, *Catalogue lot number 377 Chasses du Cerf Annees 1789 et 1790*.

¹⁵ CHARLES ELOI VIAL, *Les chasses des souverains en France 1804-1830*, Paris Sorbonne Thesis 2013, p. 15.

¹⁶ Nicolardot, *Journal de Louis XVI*, p. 138: '5 octobre tire a la porte de Chatillon, tue 81 pieces inerrompu par les evenemts, aller et revenir a cheval. 6 depart pour paris a mid et demi, visite a l'hotel de ville soupe et couche aux Tuileries.'

¹⁷ PHILIP MANSEL, *The Court of France 1789-1830*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, p. 24.

¹⁸ MANSEL, 1988, pp. 25-6, quoting 01 201 decision du roi, 18 September 1790.

¹⁹ *The Journal of Mary Frampton, from the Year 1779, until the Year 1846*, edited by Harriot Georgiana Mundy, reprint, Elibron Classics, Adamant Media Corporation, Boston 2001, p. 77: letter of C. B. Wollaston, 12 october 1791 to Mary Frampton.

²⁰ JEROME ZIESENISS, *Berthier, frère d'armes de l'Empereur*, Paris, Belfond 1985, pp. 212, 221.

²¹ FREDERIC MASSON, *Jadis et Aujourd'hui*, Paris, P. Ollendorff 1908, pp. 318, 321.

Napoleon I revived the court's autumn hunting trips to Fontainebleau, which for reasons of economy Louis XVI had suspended in 1787. He went hunting there for about 50 days in the autumns of 1807, 1809 and 1810. About 10,000 people were lodged in the palace and the town. As they had under Louis XVI, theatre companies came from Paris to entertain courtiers in the palace theatre in the evening²².

From Vienna the Prince de Ligne, who had followed the hunts of Louis XV and Louis XVI, commented: 'Why does Napoleon act the King of France, being the king of the world?..When you hunt kings, you should not hunt deer'²³.

By 1812 the imperial hunt had a staff of 100 men, 115 horses and 170 hounds, and cost about 445,000 francs a year, compared to over a million under Louis XVI. Many of its officials had served in the hunts of Louis XVI. They included Beauterne, porte-arquebuse of the King and the Emperor; Bongars, page de la venerie; Caqueray; and Hanneucourt. Their hunting skills were more important than their political antecedents. After his marriage to the Archduchess Marie Louise in 1810, with the increasing grandeur of the court, Napoleon devoted more hours to such a traditional monarchical occupation as the hunt, as well as to attendance at the theatre and at mass²⁴.

After 1814 the same spirit of professional continuity dominated the court hunt of the Restoration. As in other fields, such as the army and the administration, professionalism triumphed over political conflicts. Like government ministries and the first Chamber of Deputies, the royal hunt was not a revival of the old regime but a continuation of the Empire. Numbers remained roughly the same: 108 in 1789; 97 in 1813; 113 in 1830²⁵.

Berthier remained 'acting Grand Veneur' in 1814, until his death in May 1815. He was followed, in 1819, by the retired president du conseil the Duc de Richelieu. As he had since 1804, Girardin continued to run the hunt. Through his efficiency and economy, despite his strong opinions and Napoleonic background, he won the favour of the dedicated hunters, the Comte d'Artois and his sons the Ducs d'Angouleme and de Berri²⁶. Louis XVIII, who had had no venerie in his household as a prince, did not hunt as a king – although every fete de Saint Louis his hunt presented him with a 'bouquet de gibier'.

The Restoration was a parliamentary regime with an aggressive liberal press. Richelieu was proud that, nevertheless, there was little public criticism of the royal hunt²⁷. Girardin never experienced what he called 'preventions defavorables de la part de la multitude'²⁸.

²² *Napoleon a Fontainebleau*, Paris, Réunion des musées nationaux 2003, pp. 1-13.

²³ PRINCE DE LIGNE, *Fragments de l'Histoire de Ma Vie*, Paris, Plon 1927-8, I, p. 313; Prince de Ligne, *Ma Napoleonide*, Paris, Honoré Champion 1913, pp. 10-11, 37.

²⁴ PIERRE BRANDA, *Napoleon et ses Hommes*, Paris, Fayard 2011, pp. 205-7, 386.

²⁵ PHILIP MANSEL, *The Court of France*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1989, pp 197, 203.

²⁶ COMTE DE PUYMAIGRE, *Souvenirs sur l'Emigration, l'Empire et la Restauration*, Paris, E. Plon 1884, p. 289.

²⁷ Archives Nationales [Archives Nationales, Paris] O3 [serie Maison du Roi 1814-1830] 146 Richelieu to Marquis de Lauriston, 24 February 1821.

²⁸ AN 03 504 ordres et reglements, letter of 22 August 1827.

Indeed under Charles X the hunt entered a golden age. Soldiers of the army were used as beaters. They got extra pay and the present of a rabbit for soldiers, and a pheasant for officers²⁹. The King spent so much time hunting he was called ‘robin des bois’, or Robin Hood³⁰. The *Livrets des Chasses du Roi*, bound in gilt morocco, stamped with the royal coat of arms, record with manic precision every piece of game shot. I have seen those for 1822³¹, 1827³² and 1829 – the last is in the Musée international de la chasse in Gien. Here are some figures. In 1822 17,217 pieces of game were shot. On 24 August 1827 the King shot 477 pieces; the Dauphin 698. On 13 October 1829 at Versailles the king shot in all 345:207 pheasants, 60 grey partridge, 61 hares, 13 rabbits and 3 chevreuils. The dauphin shot 298; officers accompanying them 189. Each day the score is counted. When Charles X visited Compiègne and Fontainebleau, it was simply to hunt: unlike Louis XVI or Napoleon I, he did not take his ministers and court with him. Talleyrand commented, in a letter to Royer-Collard on 21 August 1825: ‘que dites vous des chasses du roi? Dans une seule il a tiré 1,793 pièces de gibier, ce qu’aucun roi de France n’avait fait encore, quel progrès de la civilisation!’³³.

Like the rest of the royal household, the royal hunt was an expanding institution. In 1822 Girardin wanted to extend the royal hunt’s control over game and wolves in state forests throughout France, and to revive some ancien régime game laws, including one giving the king exclusive huntign rights in state forests³⁴.

Girardin did win the right to award permis de chasse in all state forests. He maintained running battles with Governors of royal palaces (who used to have authority over the surrounding forests) and with the Intendance des Domaines et Forêts, in order to run the royal forests for hunting not revenue. In 1830 he obtained the authority to order promotions of gardes forestiers. In other words to control their careers³⁵.

On 26 July 1830, in the park of Saint-Cloud, Charles X went shooting in France for the last time. His coup that day to increase royal authority failed. Paris rose against the monarchy in the ‘trois glorieuses’. As in October 1789 the politics of Paris interrupted the pleasures of the hunt. In a last act of loyalty Girardin brought Charles X some money from the hunt’s reserves to help pay for the journey from France to England³⁶. Many revolutionary caricatures of Charles X mocked his love of hunting and shooting.

Inspired to dislike the hunt by his ‘enlightened’ governess Madame de Genlis – as well as by the example of his grandfather the Duc de Penthièvre – Louis-Philippe abolished the royal hunt as well

²⁹ JEAN-FRANÇOIS-JOSEPH-PIERRE DAMIEN DE SCHALLER, *Souvenirs d’un Officier Fribourgeois*, Fribourg, Impr. A. Henseler 1890, p. 130.

³⁰ MANSEL, *Court of France*, p. 140.

³¹ Rosebery sale.

³² Sold by the Etude Aguttes, Paris, on 10 October 2001.

³³ CHARLES MAURICE DE TALLEYRAND PÉRIGORD et PIERRE PAUL ROYER-COLLARD, *Correspondance inédite*, edited by Georges Lacour-Gayet, n.d., p. 11, letter of 21 August 1825.

³⁴ AN O3 504 Règlement sur le Service du Grand Veneur et sur les chasses du roi December 1814, Projet de règlement, 27 February 1823; MASSON, 1908, p. 322.

³⁵ PHILIP MANSEL, *The Court of France 1814-1830*, University of London thesis, London 1978, pp. 28, 30, 32; O3 558 f.142-3 rapport of 25 February 1830.

³⁶ *Vingt-cinq ans à Paris, 1826-1850. Journal du comte Rodolphe Apponyi*, publié par Ernest Daudet, 4 vols. Paris, Plon 1913-26, I, p. 304, 17 August 1830.

as the entire Maison du Roi. In September 1830 all the equipment was sold at auction, including the hunting dogs. The royal forests were leased to private individuals³⁷.

After the wasteland of the July monarchy, the French court hunt reentered the promised land under the Second Empire. Again the principle of professional continuity triumphed over regime change. As the Empire had copied the Ancien regime, and the Restoration the Empire, so the Second Empire copied the Restoration. Since a royal hunt was an operation of great complexity, the most competent technicians had to be employed, and, whatever the regime, they were likely to be the same people.

In April 1852, even before he became Emperor, the Prince President asked his friend Edgar Ney, son of Marechal Ney, to establish his hunt on the model, and with the personnel, of the hunt of Charles X. Ney was elegant and efficient and became Grand Veneur in 1865. The real organiser of the new imperial hunt was a man of sixty seven, the premier piqueur Reverdy. Born in 1785, he had served in 1803-30 in the hunts of Napoleon I and Charles X. His father had served Louis XVI³⁸. In all there were 120 hounds, mainly English, and 60 horses. The hunt moved between Compiègne, Fontainebleau, Saint-Germain and Rambouillet (the last two were abandoned in 1857)³⁹. In addition the Emperor's cousin Prince Napoleon had his own hunt at Meudon, where he went hunting every Sunday⁴⁰.

The companionship of the hunt can transform personal relations. More than shoots, which are generally exclusively male, they place men and women in physical proximity, and have often led to love affairs. Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour first sighted each other when she was following a royal hunt in the forest of Fontainebleau. After a hunt at Compiègne in December 1852, the Marquis de Toulangeon said: 'vous avez vu ces deux dames qui ont suivi la chasse? Eh bien c'est madame de Montijo et sa fille qui va devenir l'Imperatrice.' Hunting as the Emperor's guest at Compiègne helped Eugenie de Montijo – an expert horsewoman – charm Napoleon III and become Empress of the French⁴¹.

A luxurious volume printed in 1905 commemorates the hunts of the Second Empire as minutely as the diary of Louis XVI had those of his reign, with the additional luxury of reproductions of pictures by the official 'peintre de la venerie', Godefroy Jadin. To wear the buttons of the imperial hunt, courtiers applied for the Emperor's authorisation through the Grand Veneur. The buttons were given to lucky applicants; but they had to buy their own green hunting habit, with crimson collar and cuffs. Among those who obtained 'le bouton' were the Prince of Wales – who was thrown off his horse during a visit in 1869; the Austrian and British ambassadors; leading men of the regime such as the Duc de Morny, Achille Fould, the Duc de Persigny, the Marechal de Macmahon and many others⁴².

³⁷ MASSON, 1908, pp. 328-9.

³⁸ LE PETIT HOMME ROUGE, *The court of the Tuileries 1852-1870*, London, Chatto & Windus 1912, pp. 358-9; FRÉDÉRIC MONCEY, DUC DE CONEGLIANO, *Le Second Empire: la maison de l'Empereur*, Paris, C. Lévy 1897, p. 242.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 245, 247.

⁴⁰ FELIX M. WHITEHURST, *Court and Social life in France under Napoleon III*, 2 vols, London, Tinsley 1873, I, pp. 27, 17 January 1865.

⁴¹ EMMANUEL AND GODEFROY JADIN, *Maison de l'Empereur: la Venerie*, Paris: Manzi, Joyant et Cie 1905, p. 6.

⁴² MONCEY, 1897, p. 241; HOMME ROUGE, p. 360.

Compiègne, where the court went every autumn hunting season, was the Versailles of the Second Empire. The Emperor's guests included, in different years, the Kings of Prussia, Netherlands, Italy and Portugal and the Emperor of Austria, as well as hundreds of French people organised in 'series'. The Emperor, who had frequently followed the Royal Buck-hounds in England, was a skilled huntsman who often finished off the stag himself. On the feast day of Saint Hubert, there was a mass at 4 am attended by hunt servants.

The 'curee' – an untranslatable word meaning both quarry and scramble – took place by torchlight in the evening, in front of the palace (as it still sometimes does at Compiègne and Fontainebleau, organised by the private hunts which now rent the hunting in the forest). It is fully described in Zola's novel *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon* (and is also used as a metaphor for the regime's redevelopment of Paris in another Zola novel, *La Curee*). It was watched from the palace balcony by the Emperor and Empress, from the terrace by their guests and, opposite them, by spectators from Compiègne: valets in livery with powdered hair held the torches. Hounds barked and panted with hunger, held back by the huntsmen's whips, while huntsmen played French hunting music on their horns. Finally the hounds rushed to devour the deer in 'un tremblement convulsif de jouissance'⁴³.

The last imperial hunt, on 20 April 1870 at Fontainebleau, was attended by the Queen of the Netherlands. In September as the regime collapsed, the dogs were beaten to death; the surviving saddles and bridles were cut to pieces by the German invaders⁴⁴.

It was the end of the royal hunt, as of official court life in France. After their return to France in 1871, however, two of Louis-Philippe's sons the Duc d'Aumale and the Prince de Joinville continued some royal hunting traditions, as they had during their father's reign⁴⁵. The grandson of Charles X, the Legitimist pretender the Comte de Chambord, ran magnificent hunts in Austria, leasing extra forests around his estate at Frohsdorf, and in the mountains to shoot chamois. He invited many guests and an average of 25, 000 beasts a year were killed – even exceeding the scale of the Restoration Court⁴⁶. Perhaps the pleasures of hunting in Austria contributed to his decision to refuse the throne in France in 1873.

In France, as part of the court life of the semi-monarchical Fifth Republic, 'Chasses présidentielles' took place in the ancient royal forests of Rambouillet, Marly and Chambord (which are also partly hunted by private hunts). The President's guests included officials, diplomats, deputies, foreign heads of state. Presidents Giscard and Pompidou loved the hunts. De Gaulle went once a year. In 1995 they were in theory suppressed. In reality politicians of all parties continue to enjoy hunting, as guests of the government, at Chambord – built by François Ier as a hunting residence five hundred years earlier. Regimes change. The hunt goes on.

⁴³ *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*, 1876, second edition, pp. 221-5.

⁴⁴ JADIN, 1905, pp. 23, 27.

⁴⁵ CHARLES-MAURICE DE VAUX, *L'armorial de la vénerie; Les grands veneurs de France*, Paris, J. Rothschild, 1895, passim.

⁴⁶ JEAN PAUL BLED, *Les Bourbons en exil en Autriche*, in *La présence des Bourbons en Europe XVIe –XXIe siècle*, Paris, Puf 2003, ed. Lucien Bèly, 2003, p. 274.