

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The Estates General

The Estates General, a venerable institution of the Ancien Regime, comprised representatives from all Three Estates. In contrast to contemporary legislative bodies, this assembly did not convene regularly; rather, it was summoned intermittently by the monarch, often during times of conflict or crisis.

King Louis' Concerns Regarding the Estates General

- L What method would the Estates General employ to cast votes on any matter – Individual or Estate?
- L How would the deputies be chosen?
- L To what extent would the concerns articulated in the charts and pamphlets be addressed?
- L What would transpire when the Estates General convened?
- L How did this foster a revolutionary atmosphere? How did these expressions of aspirations contribute to a revolutionary environment?
- L How did the procedural approach contribute to a revolutionary climate?

What method would the Estates General use to cast votes on any matter brought before it – Individual or Estate?

Traditionally, the Estates General had met as three distinct estates. Voting at the Estates General was executed by the estate – meaning each of the Three Estates deliberated on issues separately and cast a unified vote. This electoral process led to the Third Estate, representing approximately 97% of the population, often being overruled by the First and Second Estates, which together represented the remaining 3%.

In September 1788, at the king's behest, the Paris Parlement issued edicts summoning the Estates General. According to these edicts, the Estates General was to adhere to its 1614 structure and procedures, with the Three Estates meeting separately and voting by the estate. This decision sparked indignation among the bourgeoisie and within the pages of newspapers. The Parlements once praised as defenders of liberty and the people, were now criticized as advocates of aristocratic self-interest.

How Would Deputies Be Selected?

First Estate: The clergy predominantly elected parish priests to represent them, with only 51 out of 291 deputies being bishops.
Second Estate: The majority of noble representatives were drawn from ancient noble families in the provinces, many of whom were impoverished and conservative. However, 90 out of the 282 deputies could be classified as liberal nobles and were set to play a leading role in the Estates General.

This led to the emergence of two slogans: "Voting by head" and "Doubling the Third." In December, following the advice of Necker, Louis sought a compromise to avoid alienating either side and agreed to double the number of seats for Third Estate deputies. Yet, he remained silent on the voting process, leaving this matter for the Estates to decide in May 1789.

- Doubling the number of Third Estate representatives achieved little. Nevertheless, the increased presence of Third Estate deputies further underscored the injustice of France's deeply entrenched social hierarchy and solidified their self-identification as the 'Nation.'
- The 610 deputies chosen to represent the Third Estate were well-educated, articulate, and financially well-off. The majority came from the bourgeoisie, with no peasants or workers among them. The largest group consisted of venal officeholders, followed by lawyers. Only 13% were involved in trade and industry. This absence of the industrial middle class meant they did not play a leading role in the events preceding the Revolution.
- Simultaneously, the convening of the Estates General necessitated not only the election of deputies but also the compilation of Cahiers – documents outlining grievances and reform proposals to guide the deputies. Each estate voiced its concerns in its respective local regions.

Significance of Cahiers

These Cahiers comprise a vast collection of groundbreaking ideas and perspectives. The belief that it was possible to transform and reform the existing order gained momentum and significantly contributed to the outbreak of the French Revolution in the summer of 1789. Some of the nobility's Cahiers called for the Estates-General to draft a constitution.

Sieyes' pamphlet criticized the privileged classes and questioned the sincerity of their reform efforts. It asserted that the Third Estate, both in terms of numbers and economic importance, represented the nation. This shift in self-perception marked a departure from the usual negative definition of the Third Estate based on their lack of nobility or privilege. Instead, it defined the privileged orders negatively, arguing that they served no constructive social purpose – a precursor to the emergence of a self-assured bourgeois and Sans-Culottes culture.

The Revellon Riots

April 23, 1789 - Reveillon Riots

In April 1789, widespread riots erupted against the wallpaper manufacturer Reveillon. This event struck fear into the bourgeoisie, as it vividly demonstrated the power of the Parisian crowd when provoked – a harbinger of class conflict.

Reveillon became a target of crowd anger after he suggested that bread prices should be lowered to make it more affordable for workers. In the tense and desperate atmosphere, where bread prices constituted 88% of daily income, his statement was misinterpreted as advocating reduced wages. Angry mobs vandalized his residence and factory.

These riots are significant as they represent an early revolutionary event and offer insights into the fault lines dividing French society – the lower working and peasant classes pitted against the bourgeoisie. Rioters chanted slogans such as "Down with the rich," "Long live the Estates General," and "Long live Necker" as they destroyed Reveillon's property.

Significance:

The urban poor recognized their collective power, while the bourgeoisie started to fear the influence of the Parisian mob and sought ways to control it. This significance became evident on July 15, 1789, when the bourgeoisie formed a militia to protect the rights and property of the middle class against the mob.

The calling of the Estates General was initially viewed as a solution to the nation's fiscal crisis, but its assembly complicated the political crisis. The gathering of the Estates General transformed the nature of political discourse in France and the desire for reform. Previously, resentment had been directed at the absolute power of the monarchy, with calls for reform envisioning a parliamentary check on royal authority. However, the defence of voting by estate by the Paris Parlements and the support for voting by estate in 61% of noble Cahiers exposed concealed grievances against the first two orders. Members of the Third Estate realized they were no longer battling a single adversary, but three distinct ones.

How Did the Estates General Impact the Emergence of the Revolutionary Climate?

The compilation of the Cahiers solidified discontent within France and heightened the collective anticipation of reforms. This process shifted the conflict from a battle solely against royal absolutism to a broader confrontation with the entire framework of the Ancien Régime. It accentuated the societal disparities witnessed at Versailles in May 1789.

On May 5, 1789, when the Estates General convened, the government had a prime chance to assume control. The Third Estate, despite its political inexperience, would have rallied behind the King had he pledged reforms. Unfortunately, the government failed to seize this opportunity by remaining passive and not presenting any clear agenda. While Necker discussed tax system reforms, he omitted specific reform measures, and there was no mention of a constitution, despite it being a common demand in all Cahiers. This period of inactivity extended for weeks, with the government failing to exhibit any form of leadership.

- The representatives of the Third Estate, aligning with the general assembly's preference for unified rather than segregated proceedings, emphasized the importance of collectively validating deputies' credentials.
- While it may appear inconsequential, the choice between separate or unified verification was regarded as a precedent for how the Estates General would conduct its discussions on various issues.
- Until this disagreement found resolution, the Third Estate delegates abstained from commencing the verification process. They convened and deliberated but refrained from recognizing their individual statuses, structuring themselves, or initiating discussions on reforms.

Sieyès suggested to the Commons that they should call upon the privileged estates to either unite with them or relinquish their roles as representatives of the nation. This represented a groundbreaking step, as Sieyès wasn't merely inviting deputies to align with the Third Estate but urging them to acknowledge their status as representatives of the French nation – a parallel yet competing authority to the monarchy. Louis' authority had not just been called into question but outright dismissed by a faction that considered itself accountable to a distinct power – the people.

National Assembly

- On June 10, the impasse was finally resolved when the Third Estate independently made the decision to proceed with the verification of deputies' credentials, even in the absence of participation from the other two estates. Subsequently, a gradual influx of clergy members aligned themselves with the Third Estate over the next several days.
- On June 17, the representatives of the Third Estate cast their votes to declare themselves the National Assembly. They argued that they represented the majority of the nation, thereby claiming the authority to govern its matters and determine taxation.

- By June 19, the clergy members made their choice to align with the Third Estate, solidifying the evolving political landscape.

Tennis Court Oath

- Compelled to take action, King Louis made the decision to convene a royal session on June 23, 1789, known as the "séance royale," in which all three estates would gather to present a series of reforms.
- On June 20, 1789, members of the third estate arrived at the hall where they usually met, only to find it closed for maintenance in preparation for the séance. They had not received prior notification and suspected this was a deliberate action aimed at them.
- In response, they gathered at a nearby tennis court and took an oath not to disband until they had established a constitution for France. They asserted that the King lacked the authority to dissolve their assembly.

To reestablish a degree of royal control, Necker proposed that the King convene a royal session. Louis faced three potential courses of action:

- 1) Necker suggested that Louis take a reconciliatory stance, disregarding the occurrences between June 10 and June 17 and embracing collective voting.
- 2) Alternatively, he could disband the National Assembly, even using force if deemed essential. This aligns with the advice of Marie Antoinette and Louis' brothers, the Comte d'Artois and Comte de Provence.
- 3) The King also had the option to communicate to the deputies his preferences regarding what he would accept and what he would not accept.

June proved to be a challenging month for Louis on a personal level, as the Dauphin passed away. Faced with the conflicting arguments of Artois and Necker, he endeavoured to chart a middle course. When the royal session took place, Louis addressed the deputies, asserting the following:

1. The National Assembly had no legal standing.
2. The system of seigniorialism would remain intact.
3. The various estates would persist in convening within their distinct orders.

However, he did make the following concessions:

1. Acknowledging the necessity of consulting the representatives of the nation (via the Estates General) regarding new taxes.
2. Ensuring freedom of the press.
3. Abolishing internal customs like the Gabelle.
4. Eliminating Letters de cachet.

The King concluded by instructing the deputies to go back to their designated locations. When the King's Master of Ceremonies directed the Third Estate to disband, Mirabeau's memorable response was that they would only depart "under the threat of bayonets," and Bailly declared, "The gathered nation does not follow commands." On June 27th, Louis yielded to their demands.

- In the final week of June, Louis took decisive measures, deploying a contingent of 4,000 troops to both Paris and Versailles, deeming them to be unwaveringly loyal. Furthermore, Louis initiated the mobilization of substantial foreign forces, including Swiss and German mercenaries, rather than relying on French troops.
- By July 1st, a formidable force of 20,000 troops had encircled Paris, and this number swelled to 30,000 troops by July 11th. There were signs that Louis and his advisors were considering the use of military force to disperse the National Assembly.
- In the midst of this precarious situation, the Assembly found a reprieve thanks to the forceful actions of the Parisian populace. As Mirabeau noted, "A substantial number of troops already encircle us and more arrive each day... These unmistakable war preparations are evident to all and kindle fiery indignation in every heart."

A Volatile Situation

By July 1789, the atmosphere in Paris had become extremely tense: The cost of bread had surged to its highest point, accounting for 88% of daily earnings. Many common citizens were convinced that a conspiracy involving nobility and profiteers was responsible for food scarcity and soaring prices. Rumours even circulated that the grain shortage might be a calculated scheme by influential nobles to quash the revolutionary spirit through starvation. The presence of a substantial number of jobless individuals meant that the "menu people" (ordinary citizens) were readily prepared to take to the streets at the slightest stimulus.

Necker's Dismissal

With an army of 30,000 soldiers positioned in close proximity to the capital, Louis felt sufficiently empowered to remove Necker from his position. Necker had incurred the King's loss of trust, primarily stemming from the failure of the Estates General, and he was perceived as being overly accommodating toward the Third Estate. Louis' dismissal of Necker was widely interpreted as an

indication of his desire to maintain absolute authority. Necker had garnered popularity among the Parisian populace for his alignment with the Third Estate's aspirations. He had revoked Turgot's unpopular grain liberalization policies, which had resulted in rising prices, and had endorsed subsidized grain. His policies had fostered confidence in his financial acumen.

- July 12, 1789: Upon hearing the news of Necker's dismissal, an already tense situation in Paris was further aggravated. Desmoulins mounted a table and implored Parisians to "arm themselves and don cockades for mutual recognition." Forty-two out of fifty customs posts encircling the city were razed, and confrontations with foreign troops erupted within the Tuileries palace.
- On July 12 and 13, individuals began breaking into firearms and swordsmith shops to equip themselves. The chain of command among the Guards Francoise crumbled as they started to heed the orators and defied orders, affirming to the crowd, "We too are citizens."
- July 14: Thousands of people, primarily tradespeople, artisans, and wage earners, laid their hands on weapons. In the early afternoon, the attention of the Parisian crowd, which had swelled to around 80,000 individuals, shifted to the Bastille. A butcher beheaded the fortress's commander, and the crowd paraded his severed head on a pike as a symbol of victory through the city streets.

Significance of the Storming of the Bastille

The storming of the Bastille assumed the role of a symbol for the people's empowerment, their resolve against a monarchy increasingly perceived as duplicitous and conspiratorial against its own subjects. Even though Louis and his family retained their authority following the Bastille's fall, it was evident that he had temporarily lost control over the city, making it imperative for the National Assembly to convene without interference. Complicating matters, the King's brother and some high-ranking nobles exacerbated the situation by fleeing to Vienna, attempting to secure foreign support for the restoration of royal authority.

The collapse of the Bastille was met with jubilation, and the former prison quickly transformed into a prominent tourist attraction. Serving as a symbol of the erstwhile absolutist regime, it was ultimately demolished, and fragments of its walls were peddled as keepsakes to tourists. The Paris militia underwent a transformation, being renamed the National Guard and placed under the command of Lafayette. The Assembly, now recognized as the National Constituent Assembly as of July 9th, began preparations for the formulation of a constitution. It no longer harboured fears of dismissal by the King. In essence, power had shifted from the King to the people's elected representatives, forcing Louis to share his authority with the National Assembly.

Word of the Bastille's fall reverberated throughout France, intensifying the activities among the rural population. Louis found himself unable to dictate terms to the Assembly as he could no longer rely on the loyalty of the army. The Parisian revolt triggered a mass exodus of nobles, including the King's brother, with approximately 20,000 emigrating abroad in just two months. Many of these emigres aligned themselves with foreign opponents of the Revolution. On July 17th, the King embarked on a journey from Versailles to Paris, where he was met with a hostile reception from the populace. He acknowledged the newly established revolutionary council, the Commune, and the National Assembly, recognizing the shifting dynamics of authority.

The Paris Commune

- The forceful actions taken by the inhabitants of Paris caused anxiety among the more affluent residents of the city. Their concerns revolved around the potential breakdown of law and order, the threat of looting, and the possibility of property being attacked.
- Louis XVI's authority over Paris had slipped away, prompting the electors to convene an emergency meeting within the Town Hall. During this meeting, they established the Paris Commune to administer the city and formed a National Guard, consisting of ordinary citizens, to safeguard it.
- The primary objective of the National Guard was to protect property from potential assaults by the impoverished and to ensure the city's security against actions initiated by the King.
- Lafayette was appointed as the inaugural commander of the National Guard, while Bailly assumed the role of Paris's Mayor.