

# National Assembly (French Revolution)

During the French Revolution, the **National Assembly** (French: *Assemblée nationale*), which existed from June 17 to July 9, 1789, was a transitional body between the Estates-General and the National Constituent Assembly.

## Background

The Estates-General had been called May 5th 1789 to deal with France's financial crisis, but promptly fell to squabbling over its own structure. Its members had been elected to represent the estates of the realm: the First Estate (the clergy), the Second Estate (the nobility) and the Third Estate (which, in theory, represented all of the commoners and, in practice, represented the bourgeoisie). The Third Estate had been granted "double representation"—that is, twice as many delegates as each of the other estates—but at the opening session on May 5, 1789 they were informed that all voting would be "by estates" not "by head", so their double representation was to be meaningless in terms of power. They refused this and proceeded to meet separately.<sup>[1]</sup> <sup>[2]</sup>

Shuttle diplomacy among the estates continued without success until May 27; on May 28, the representatives of the Third Estate began to meet on their own,<sup>[2]</sup> calling themselves the *Communes* ("Commons") and proceeding with their "verification of powers" independently of the other bodies; from June 13 to June 17 they were gradually joined by some of the nobles and the majority of the clergy and other people such as the peasants.

## The Assembly convenes

After some preliminary debate over the name, at the opening session, June 17, this body declared itself the National Assembly: an assembly not of the Estates but composed of "the People". They invited the other orders to join them, but made it clear that they intended to conduct the nation's affairs with or without them.<sup>[2]</sup>

This newly constituted assembly immediately attached itself to the capitalists — the sources of the credit needed to fund the national debt — and to the common people. They consolidated the public debt and declared all existing taxes to have been illegally imposed, but voted in these same taxes provisionally, only as long as the Assembly continued to sit. This restored the confidence of the capitalists and gave them a strong interest in keeping the Assembly in session. As for the common people, the Assembly established a committee of subsistence to deal with food shortages.<sup>[2]</sup>

Initially, the Assembly announced (and for the most part probably believed) itself to be operating in the interests of King Louis XVI as well as those of the people. In theory, royal authority still prevailed and new laws continued to require the king's consent.<sup>[3]</sup>



Tinted etching of Louis XVI of France, 1792. The caption refers to Louis's capitulation to the National Assembly, and concludes "The same Louis XVI who bravely waits until his fellow citizens return to their hearths to plan a secret war and exact his revenge."

## The King resists

Jacques Necker, finance minister to Louis XVI, had earlier proposed that the king hold a *Séance Royale* (Royal Session) in an attempt to reconcile the divided Estates. The king agreed; but none of the three orders were formally notified of the decision to hold a Royal Session. All debates were to be put on hold until the *séance royale* took place.

Events soon overtook Necker's complex scheme of giving in to the *Communes* on some points while holding firm on others. No longer interested in Necker's advice, Louis XVI, under the influence of the courtiers of his privy council, resolved to go in state to the Assembly, annul its decrees, command the separation of the orders, and dictate the reforms to be effected by the restored Estates-General. On June 19, he ordered the Salle des États, the hall where the National Assembly met, closed.

Perhaps if Louis had simply marched into the Salle des États where the National Assembly met, he might have succeeded. Instead, he remained at Marly and ordered the hall closed, expecting to prevent the Assembly from meeting for several days while he prepared.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Tennis Court Oath

On the morning of June 20, the deputies were shocked to discover the doors to their chamber locked and guarded by soldiers. Immediately fearing the worst and anxious that a royal coup was imminent, the deputies congregated in the king's nearby indoor tennis court, where they took a solemn collective oath "never to separate, and to meet wherever circumstances demand, until the constitution of the kingdom is established and affirmed on solid foundations". The deputies pledged to continue to meet until a constitution had been written, despite the royal prohibition. 576 men signed the oath, with only one refusing. The oath was both a revolutionary act and an assertion that political authority derived from the people and their representatives, rather than from the monarch himself.

## Confrontation and recognition

Two days later, deprived of use of the tennis court as well, the National Assembly met in the church of Saint Louis, where the majority of the representatives of the clergy joined them: efforts to restore the old order had served only to accelerate events. When, on June 23, in accord with his plan, the king finally addressed the representatives of all three estates, he encountered a stony silence. He concluded by ordering all to disperse. The nobles and clergy obeyed; the deputies of the common people remained seated in a silence finally broken by Mirabeau, whose short speech culminated, "A military force surrounds the assembly! Where are the enemies of the nation? Is Catiline at our gates? I demand, investing yourselves with your dignity, with your legislative power, you inclose yourselves within the religion of your oath. It does not permit you to separate till you have formed a constitution." The deputies stood firm.<sup>[2]</sup>

Necker, conspicuous by his absence from the royal party on that day, found himself in disgrace with Louis, but back in the good graces of the National Assembly. Those of the clergy who had joined the Assembly at the church of Saint Louis remained in the Assembly; forty-seven members of the nobility, including the Duke of Orléans, soon joined them; by June 27, the royal party had overtly given in, although the likelihood of a military counter-coup remained in the air. The French military began to arrive in large numbers around Paris and Versailles.

In the *séance royale* of June 23, the King granted a *Charte octroyée*, a constitution granted of the royal favour, which affirmed, subject to the traditional limitations, the right of separate deliberation for the three orders, which constitutionally formed three chambers. This move failed; soon that part of the deputies of the nobles who still stood apart joined the National Assembly at the request of the king. The Estates-General had ceased to exist, having become the National Assembly (and after July 9, 1789, the National Constituent Assembly), though these bodies consisted of the same deputies elected by the separate orders.

## Reconstitution

Messages of support poured into the Assembly from Paris and other French cities. On July 9, 1789, the Assembly, reconstituting itself as the National Constituent Assembly, addressed the king in polite but firm terms, requesting the removal of the troops (which now included foreign regiments, who showed far greater obedience to the king than did his French troops), but Louis declared that he alone could judge the need for troops, and assured them that the troops had deployed strictly as a precautionary measure. Louis "offered" to move the assembly to Noyon or Soissons: that is to say, to place it between two armies and deprive it of the support of the Parisian people.

## Notes

- [1] The First Revolution (<http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/REV/FIRST.HTM>), Revolution and After: Tragedies and Forces, World Civilizations: An Internet Classroom and Anthology, Washington State University. Accessed online 14 March 2007.
- [2] Mignet, Chapter 1
- [3] The French Revolution: The Moderate Stage, 1789–1792 (<http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/lecture12a.html>)
- [4] SparkNotes: the French Revolution (1789–1799): The National Assembly: 1789–1791 (<http://www.sparknotes.com/history/european/frenchrev/section3.rhtml>)

## References

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