

The Estates-General of 1789

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1789, the year which marked the outset of the French Revolution and the infamous Estates-General, was a turbulent year for France. The Estates-General further provoked the political unrest of the common people and encouraged them to overthrow the power and authority of the more privileged. The spirit of the French Revolution, although stemming largely from political and societal injustice, is encapsulated in the violent chaos that ensued. Understanding the Estates-General of 1789, then, is imperative to the understanding of the totality of the French Revolution.

The deteriorating economic position of prerevolutionary France was exasperated by the debts, loans, and poor taxation systems in the country. Numerous wars in which France participated including the Seven Years' War and the American Revolutionary War were predominately funded through loans and debts (The Long and Short Reasons). Furthermore, the taxation system was deeply flawed due to the nature of society in prerevolutionary France. The Ancien Regime divided France into Estates which dictated their social status and, along with it, their political influence. Although the First and Second Estates, the Church and nobility respectively, were far wealthier than the Third Estate, which was comprised of both the peasants and the bourgeoisie, the Third Estate was forced to pay virtually the entire tax burden. The First and Second Estates were exempt from paying taxes despite their considerable wealth, land holdings, political positions, and economic power.

Faced with the pressing financial situation, King Louis XVI called for an assembling of the Estates-General, a meeting of representatives from the three Estates, for the first time since 1614, in order to discuss the economic and financial situation in France as well as new taxes. Due to the extended amount of time since the previous meeting, there was division as to what

policies should be kept and what should be changed in accordance with the progression of the country. Notably, there was much dispute concerning representation and how votes should be counted. Originally, the three Estates were given an equal amount of representatives and each Estate cast a single vote. Naturally, however, the Third Estate was opposed to keeping this rule as they comprised of about 97% of the population (France before the French Revolution) and it was inevitable that the First and Second Estates would collaborate and vote against the Third Estate as they had more compatible views. Some, mostly the Third Estate, also wanted each representative to have a vote rather than the single vote per Estate.

On May 4, the Estates-General gathered for a formal procession through Versailles, the city intentionally chosen to host the Estates-General, as it was the home of the Chateau de Versailles, the primary residence of Louis XVI. The assembly commenced on May 5 with speeches from, among others, Louis XVI and Jacques Necker, the financial minister of France (Summoning of the Estates General, 1789). Necker's speech, a long, 3-hour monologue in which there was no agenda, only cautioned the Estates to act properly in their dealings with each other (Lefebvre 77) as well as an exhaustive account of the financial situation in France (Schama 346). Dissatisfied with the way the assembly was proceeding, the Third Estate needed to decide whether or not they would cooperate.

On May 6, each Estate split off into their separate halls to set their agendas. The First and Second Estates each focused on organizing themselves while the Third Estate was faced with their dilemma (Lefebvre 78). By emulating the other Estates, the Third Estate would be accepting the custom of vote by order. However, defiance would be to put themselves beyond the law and, therefore, not be required to act within the law (Lefebvre 78). By choosing the

latter, the Third Estate caused many issues in the proceeding sessions. The nobility voted against the placation of the Third Estate and announced itself, the Second Estate, an organized house. The clergy also voted in favor with far less unanimity and, due to several bishops and archbishops, most notably, leaning towards placation, the First Estate decided not to declare itself organized. The First Estate then suggested that each Estate appoint representatives for a committee to discuss the situation (Lefebvre 79). Although they questioned the usefulness of a negotiation as well as wanting to refrain from any suggestion that they were organized by appointing a committee, the Third Estate chose representatives for the conference so as not to offend the First Estate who was showing signs of sympathizing with them. The negotiation proved futile as neither the Second nor Third Estate would relent with the First Estate acting almost as a mediator (Lefebvre 80).

The new assembly the Third Estate was creating frequently referred to itself as the “Commons” (Lefebvre 78). However, it began discussing a new name. The name of the new, self-established assembly was important as it ought to reflect the responsibilities it intended to assume. Several lengthy names were suggested such as “assembly of the recognized and accredited representatives of the French nation” and “the representatives of the greater part of the French nation acting in the absence of the lesser part.” However, these were rejected because they were deemed insufficient. Even “representatives of the people” was declined because it was deemed offensive (Lefebvre 82). The name National Assembly was finally agreed upon several days later and was established on June 13.

The Estates-General, proving to be a disaster, began to internally tear apart the First Estate as well as the loyalties some of its members had with the Second Estate. Some of the

clergy went so far as to vote in favor of joining the Third Estate but decided against it (Lefebvre 83). The First and Second Estates debated some of the issues brought up by the Third Estate. Necker proposed that votes be counted by person rather than by order, as the Third Estate had suggested, and to give the ability to hold office to all male citizens in France. The motion was rejected because many disagreed that anything should restrict the King's power to appoint offices of war (Lefebvre 84). The session was then postponed until June 23. While the privileged Estates delayed, the Third Estate continued to gather members and coordinate its' defiance. The Assembly moved into a vacant tennis court and nearly unanimously vowed to not disassemble until a constitution could be created and assumed the power to collect and reject taxes (1789-1791: The Revolution), hence the Tennis Court Oath.

Some members from the First and Second Estates joined the National Assembly on June 22. On June 23, the day the session was moved to, Louis XVI's address was read. In it, he voided the actions of the Third Estate, protected the privileges given to the First and Second Estates, and authorized equal taxation for the First and Second Estates given that they vote in favor of it, among other things. What Louis XVI outlined as a constitution, however, was not satisfactory for the National Assembly. Perhaps, had his Constitution been proposed earlier, the Third Estate may have accepted it, but they had grown too restless to compromise. Instead, a constitution was written by committee of the National Assembly. Their new Constitution, the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen," was primarily written by the Marquis de Lafayette. He was influenced by the American "Declaration of Independence" as well as received direct help from Thomas Jefferson, who was the American Minister to France at the time. Both the "Declaration of Independence" and the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of

the Citizen” were influenced, also, by Rousseau and his idea of the social contract among other Enlightenment principles (1789-1791: The Revolution). It was critical that the social barriers the Third Estate felt they faced were broken and the French Constitution made clear that “Social distinctions can be founded only on the common utility.” (Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen).

Thus, what began as a formal assembling of the Estates to debate and discuss the financial situation of France ended with the rise of the French Revolution and the fall of the Ancien Regime. Due, in part, to the First and Second Estate’s disconnection with the perspective of the Third Estate, the privileged Estates felt unduly secure of their political and societal positions. Their failure to see the unrest of the common people proves their detachment from the reality the vast majority of France faced. It was inevitable, however, that the Third Estate would eventually rise up against the First and Second Estates and attempt to claim the political influence they so desperately insisted upon. It was said by a Frenchman at the time, “What is the Third Estate? Everything. What has it been until the present time? Nothing. What does it ask? To become something.” (Sieyes). The dissatisfaction of the Third Estate in its positions in society and politics were not debated and in the justification of the methods the remnants of the Third Estate employed there was no diplomacy. To see how an event beginning civilly escalated so quickly into the violence and destructive chaos of the French Revolution reveals the desperation and restlessness of the Third Estate as well as the obliviousness of the First and Second Estates to it. The Estates-General marked the emergence of the French Revolution and is critical to understanding the significance of the Third Estate’s violent revolt and overthrow of the power and authority of the First and Second Estates.

Works Cited

Primary

“Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.” National Legislative Bodies, 1789,

Article I.

Article I of the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen” was used for a quote. This source gave insight into what rights and liberties the French believed were not adequately given to them.

Sieyes, Emmanuel-Joseph. *What is the Third Estate?* 1789.

“What is the Third Estate?” is a pamphlet written by a figure present during the Estates-General of 1789. A quote was taken from the writing which helps show the perceptions of those involved.

Secondary

“1789-1791: The Revolution.” *MacOdrum Library*, asc.library.carleton.ca/exhibits/french-revolution-arc/1789-1791-revolution.

This article accounts some of the major events of the French Revolution. The attitudes of the National Assembly and the outrage Louis XVI had over the new French Constitution are detailed.

Fife, Graeme. *The Terror*. St. Martin’s Press, 2004.

The Terror is a book concerning primarily the Reign of Terror. However, it also gives details about how the Estates-General affected it.

“France before the French Revolution.” *History Crunch*, www.historycrunch.com/france-before-the-french-revolution.html#/.

This website focuses on the nature of French society before the French Revolution and how society was structured. There are details on how the monarchy functioned as well as the rest of the feudal structure.

Lefebvre, Georges. *The Coming of the French Revolution*. Princeton University Press, 1967.

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Schama, Simon. *Citizens*. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1989.

Citizens is a book that describes the events of the French Revolution. Particularly of interest, the book recounts details of Estates-General.

“Summoning of the Estates General, 1789.” *Chateau de Versailles*,

en.chateauversailles.fr/discover/history/key-dates/summoning-estates-general-1789.

This article from the official website of the Chateau de Versailles tells of how the Estates-General began. Many details are given of the first two days, May 4-5 of 1789.

“The Long and Short Reasons for why Revolution broke out in France in 1789.” *Swansea University*, www.swansea.ac.uk/history/history-study-guides/the-long-and-short-reasons-for-why-revolution-broke-out-in-france-in-1789/.

This website gives many of the reasons the French Revolution began. The article details the economic positions and methods of funding in prerevolutionary France.

Process Paper

The interesting and relevant topic of the Estates-General of 1789 deals with the assembling of representatives of the three Estates that was supposed to discuss and debate issues in France. The Estates-General, however, led to the dissolving of that tradition and a new way adopted by the Third Estate to debate issues. The topic relates to the theme of Debate and Diplomacy in that the dissatisfaction of the Third Estate was not debated and there was no diplomacy in their methods of achieving their ends. The topic shows how the Estates-General of 1789 was supposed to use debate and diplomacy to solve the financial issues in prerevolutionary France and yet how it descended into the chaos of the French Revolution that lacked both debate and diplomacy.

The research for this paper was done through both online and physical sources. Several books, websites, and primary source documents were used.

Research was done in preparation for and during the writing of this paper.

There is much to be learned from the Estates-General of 1789 and the ensuing French Revolution about the paradox of power specifically for the prerevolutionary French monarchy. While the events occurred long ago, the principles that inspired the Revolution and the motives displayed during the Estates-General of 1789 are equally relevant today. It is yet another warning of the dangers of absolute power to both those who hold the authority and those who wish to overthrow it.

The Estates-General of 1789 is significant to the beginning of the French Revolution and the overthrow by the Third Estate of the authority of the First and Second Estates.