

The Third Estate Revolts

France Supports the American Revolution

As France and Britain continued to battle for power in Europe after the Seven Years' War, France saw an opportunity to take another stab at Britain. France took a leap of faith to help the American colonists in their fight against the British. The Americans were hoping for aid from the French. In fact, Benjamin Franklin, a member of the secret Committees of Correspondence formed by the Continental Congress, took the initiative to contact French officials and explain the plight of the colonists. The members of the Continental Congress knew how important it was to form foreign alliances as they were declaring their independence from Britain, and France was the perfect ally. Franklin was already popular in France because of his image of republican simplicity and honesty. The actions of the American revolutionaries were of interest to many French people facing similar repression in France. The French foreign minister decided in favor of the alliance.

To help, France provided supplies, arms and ammunition, uniforms, and most important, troops. In addition, France's naval fleet supported the colonists in the Atlantic. This aid cost a lot. When the colonists entered negotiations with Britain to end the war, Franklin asked the French foreign minister for more money; the loan request was accepted, and France provided additional financial support, despite being deep in its own debts.

The Estates-General

The Estates-General was the representative assembly of pre-Revolutionary France. Its organization represented the social structure of the *ancien régime*. It was a tri-cameral, or three-house, body, with each house or order representing a different estate. The assembly's main purpose, over time, was to consider and approve any new taxes the king wished to levy.

Before 1789

The Estates-General first met on April 10, 1302, in Paris, to settle a dispute between the king and the pope. It was summoned several more times in the next one hundred years, for matters of finance and security. Louis XI only summoned it once during his reign in the 1400s, and Louis XII only summoned it once during his reign. It was used very little in the 1500s. The meeting in 1614, held during Louis XIII's reign, revealed how ineffective the institution was, and its major flaw—the inability of the Three Estates to agree—became apparent.

The Estates-General in 1789

In 1789, Louis XVI called the first meeting of the Estates-General in 175 years. The meeting was to follow traditional rules: each Estate was to meet separately, and one vote was awarded to each Estate. Because the First and Second Estates almost always voted congruently, the Third Estate was nearly guaranteed to be outvoted.

In 1789, however, the representatives of the Third Estate presented an audacious plan: the deputies of the Three Estates should meet together, and each deputy should have a vote, rather than each Estate having a single vote. The plan was rejected and each Estate initially met separately.

After a month of debates, delegates from the Third Estate invited delegates from the First Estate to join them. Eventually, some clergy members did join the Third Estate meeting. Deputy Abbé Sieyès, who had earned fame from his pamphlet, "What is the Third Estate?," proposed something radical: changing the name of the Third Estate to the National Assembly and assuming the powers of governing the nation.

The proposal was put to a vote, and it won. The First Estate and Second Estate held similar votes, and they too eventually joined the new National Assembly.

The National Assembly

Formed in June 1789 from the old Estates-General, the National Assembly began as an act of rebellion against the king, and Louis XVI responded in kind. He locked the doors of the meeting hall and declared the actions of the Third Estate to be illegal.

Undeterred, the new National Assembly adjourned to the royal tennis courts, where they swore an oath to stay the course and to write a constitution that would limit the king's power. This oath became known as the Tennis Court Oath. The signing of the oath marked the beginning of the French Revolution.