

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION



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NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The French Revolution was a major event in the history of Western societies, and has had a profound effect on the world today. The revolution that destroyed the ancient régime in France is considered by many as the first of the modern revolutions. It is one of the great turning points of the modern era because never before had the society of a powerful country been transformed to give political representation to its entire population on the basis of the principle of popular sovereignty. France was one of the most powerful states in 18th-century Europe and influenced European economic, political and cultural development. Throughout the years of the revolution, there were four different revolutionary governments, including: National Assembly, Legislative Assembly, National Convention and the Directory. The National Assembly was the first revolutionary government of the French Revolution and existed from June 14th to July 9th in 1789.

Background

On 5th May 1789, Louis XIV called together assembly of estates to pass proposal for new taxes. The first and second estate sent 300 representatives each while 600 members from third estates were sent.* Voting in the Estate General was conducted

* There were 3 estates of France before 1789. They are:

- a) **Clergy** : - In this estates, persons were invested with special functions of the church.
- b) **Nobility** : Richer most people came in these estate which lives in Forts that is Kings and queens.
- c) **Common Man** : This category was further sub divided in three categories:
 - ** Big businessmen, merchants, courts official, lawyers etc.
 - ** Peasants and artisans.

in the past with principle of each estate one Vote. But the members of third estate demanded that voting now be conducted by the assembly as a whole, where every member has one vote. King rejected the proposal; and as a result third estate walked out of the assembly. 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. 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.



Estates General of 1789

** Small peasants, landless labours, servants.

In the period of old regime, only the third estates have to pay taxes.

Tennis Court Oath

On June 20, the king ordered to close the doors of the hall, but the deliberations were moved to a nearby tennis court. It was here that the third estate established the National Assembly, the new revolutionary government, and pledged “not to separate, and to reassemble wherever circumstances require, until the constitution of the kingdom is established”. 576 men signed the oath, with only one refusing.



It was a pivotal event in the early days of the French Revolution. 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. Their solidarity forced Louis XVI to order the clergy and the nobility to join with the Third Estate in the National Assembly to give the illusion that he controlled the National Assembly. The Oath signified for the first time that French citizens formally stood in opposition to Louis XVI, and the National Assembly’s refusal to back down forced the king to make concessions.

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.

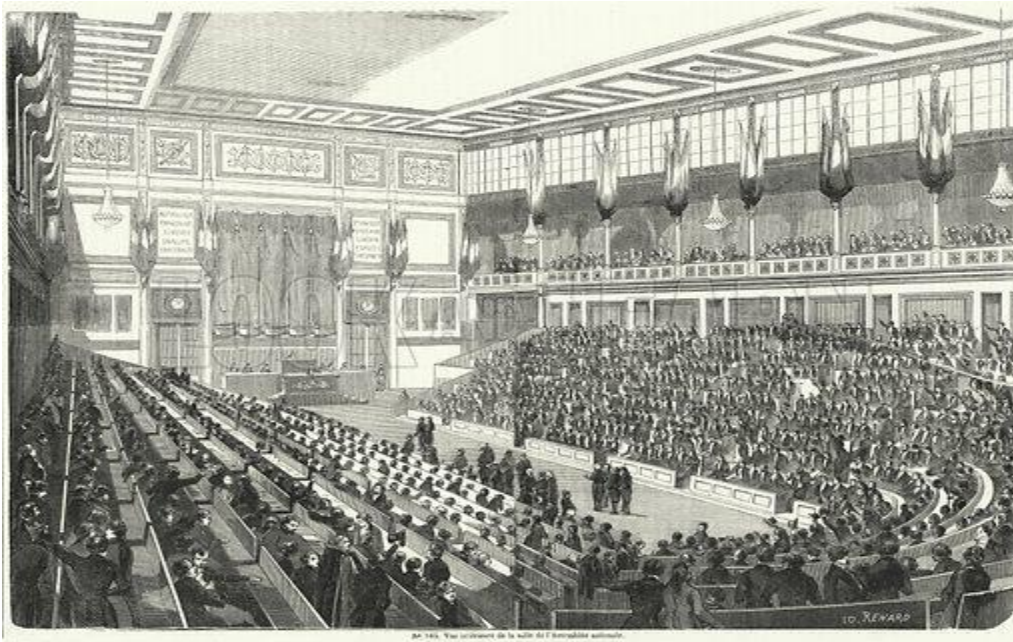
When, on June 23, in accord with his plan, the king finally addressed the representatives of all three estates, he encountered a stony silence. He concluded by ordering all to disperse. The nobles and clergy obeyed; the deputies of the common people remained seated in a silence finally broken by Mirabeau, 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. Reconstitution Messages of support poured into the Assembly from Paris and other French cities.



Mirabeau's defiance in front of the marquis de Dreux-Brézéon 23 June 1789

National Constituent Assembly

Although the National Assembly was originally made up of mostly members of the third estate, many clergy and nobility representatives soon joined as anger for the monarchy of Louis XVI spread. After July 9th, the National Assembly formed into the National Constituent Assembly, which would last until September 30th, 1791. Following the storming of the Bastille on July 14, the National Assembly became the effective government and constitution drafter that ruled until passing the 1791 Constitution, which turned France into a constitutional monarchy.



Interior of the chamber of the French National Assembly

Fall of the Bastille

On June 12, as the National Assembly continued to meet at Versailles, fear and violence consumed the capital. Though enthusiastic about the recent breakdown of royal power, Parisians grew panicked as rumors of an

impending military coup began to circulate. On July 14 1789 the Paris mob, hungry due to a lack of food from poor harvests, upset at the conditions of their lives and annoyed with their King and Government, stormed the Bastille fortress (a prison). This turned out to be more symbolic than anything else as only four or five prisoners were found. Many consider this event, now commemorated in France as a national holiday, as the start of the French Revolution.



Fall of the Bastille

Work of The Assembly

On August 4, 1789, the National Constituent Assembly abolished feudalism, sweeping away both the seigneurial rights of the Second Estate and the tithes (a 10% tax for the Church) collected by the First Estate. During the course of a few hours, nobles, clergy, towns, provinces, companies, and cities lost their special privileges. Originally the peasants were supposed to pay for the release of seigneurial dues, but the majority refused to pay and in 1793 the obligation was cancelled. The old judicial system, based on the 13 regional parliaments, was suspended in November 1789 and officially abolished in September 1790.

In an attempt to address the financial crisis, the Assembly declared, on November 2, 1789, that the property of the Church was “at the disposal of the nation.” Thus the nation had now also taken on the responsibility of the Church, which included paying the clergy and caring for the poor, the sick, and the orphaned. In December, the Assembly began to sell the lands to the highest bidder to raise revenue. Monastic vows were abolished, and in February 1790 all religious orders were dissolved. Monks and nuns were encouraged to return to private life. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy, passed in July 1790, turned the remaining clergy into employees of the state.

In the turmoil of the revolution, the Assembly members gathered the various constitutional laws they had passed into a single constitution and submitted it to recently restored Louis XVI, who accepted it, writing “I engage to maintain it at home, to defend it from all attacks from abroad, and to cause its execution by all the means it places at my disposal.” The King addressed the Assembly and received enthusiastic applause from members and spectators. With this capstone, the National Constituent Assembly adjourned in a final session on September 30, 1791. Under the Constitution of 1791, France would function as a constitutional monarchy.

But the National Constituent Assembly is best remembered for passing the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen on 26th August 1789. The declaration was written by Marquis de Lafayette, a French military officer who fought in the American Revolution and was inspired by the ideals of liberty expressed by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was vitally important to the French Revolution because it directly challenged the authority of Louis XVI.

Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was comprised a statement of principles rather than a constitution with legal effect. Its 17 articles, adopted between August 20 and August 26, 1789, by France's National Assembly, served as the preamble to the Constitution of 1791. The concepts in the Declaration come from the tenets of the Enlightenment, including individualism, the social contract as theorized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the separation of powers espoused by Montesquieu. The spirit of secular natural law rests at the foundations of the Declaration.

Articles:

1. Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good.

2. The aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.

3. The principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation. No body nor individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from the nation.

4. Liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which injures no one else; hence the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no limits except those which assure to the other members of the society the enjoyment of the same rights. These limits can only be determined by law.



5. Law can only prohibit such actions as are hurtful to society. Nothing may be prevented which is not forbidden by law, and no one may be forced to do anything not provided for by law.

6. Law is the expression of the general will. Every citizen has a right to participate personally, or through his representative, in its foundation. It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens, being equal in the eyes of the law, are equally eligible to all dignities and to all public positions and occupations, according to their abilities, and without distinction except that of their virtues and talents.

7. No person shall be accused, arrested, or imprisoned except in the cases and according to the forms prescribed by law. Any one soliciting, transmitting,

executing, or causing to be executed, any arbitrary order, shall be punished. But any citizen summoned or arrested in virtue of the law shall submit without delay, as resistance constitutes an offense.

8. The law shall provide for such punishments only as are strictly and obviously necessary, and no one shall suffer punishment except it be legally inflicted in virtue of a law passed and promulgated before the commission of the offense.

9. As all persons are held innocent until they shall have been declared guilty, if arrest shall be deemed indispensable, all harshness not essential to the securing of the prisoner's person shall be severely repressed by law.

10. No one shall be disquieted on account of his opinions, including his religious views, provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law.

11. The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law.

12. The security of the rights of man and of the citizen requires public military forces. These forces are, therefore, established for the good of all and not for the personal advantage of those to whom they shall be intrusted.

13. A common contribution is essential for the maintenance of the public forces and for the cost of administration. This should be equitably distributed among all the citizens in proportion to their means.

14. All the citizens have a right to decide, either personally or by their representatives, as to the necessity of the public contribution; to grant this freely; to know to what uses it is put; and to fix the proportion, the mode of assessment and of collection and the duration of the taxes.

15. Society has the right to require of every public agent an account of his administration.

16. A society in which the observance of the law is not assured, nor the separation of powers defined, has no constitution at all.

17. Since property is an inviolable and sacred right, no one shall be deprived thereof except where public necessity, legally determined, shall clearly demand it, and then only on condition that the owner shall have been previously and equitably indemnified.

Limitations

1. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, passed by France's National Constituent Assembly in August 1789, is a fundamental document of the French Revolution that granted civil rights to some commoners, although it excluded a significant segment of the French population. At the time of writing, the rights contained in the declaration were only awarded to men.
2. Furthermore, the declaration was a statement of vision rather than reality as it was not deeply rooted in the practice of the West or even France at the time. It embodied ideals toward which France pledged to aspire in the future.

3. There remained a distinction between those who obtained the political rights in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and those who did not. Those who were deemed to hold these political rights were called active citizens, a designation granted to men who were French, at least 25 years old, paid taxes equal to three days of work, and could not be defined as servants. The category of passive citizens was created to encompass those populations that the Declaration excluded from political rights. Tensions arose between active and passive citizens throughout the Revolution.
4. The Declaration did not recognize women as active citizens despite the fact that after the March on Versailles on October 5, 1789, women presented the Women's Petition to the National Assembly, in which they proposed a decree giving women equal rights.
5. The Declaration did not revoke the institution of slavery.
6. It was also silent about freedom in the choice of business or occupation.

Today, many historians view it as an important document in both the history of the French Revolution and the history of democracy and individual rights in the world. The Declaration, together with the American Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights, inspired in large part the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It has also influenced and inspired rights-based liberal democracy throughout the world.

In spite of some shortcomings, the new set up chalked out by the National Assembly was remarkable and placed France on the threshold of a new epoch of social development. The National Constituent Assembly dissolved itself in 1791, passing government to the newly created Legislative Assembly.