

Pre-Revolutionary Political Tensions

Summary

This extract covers the first two paragraphs of the first surviving Letter from the duchess's notebook series. We are in the period known as the 'Pre-Revolution', the endgame of the monarchy's decades-long struggle to rescue the kingdom's finances. The Assembly of Notables which the duchess describes closing in some acrimony here is actually the second such gathering of influential figures in under two years. The central aim of the first such Assembly (1787) had been to provide a controllable form of representative agreement for tax reform. An ultimately unsuccessful government strategy, the failure of the first Assembly left the monarchy with no other option by 1788 than to agree to the principle that only an Estates General (incredibly, last held in 1614) had the necessary authority to discuss and approve the financial reforms under discussion. The Assembly described in this Letter was convened to advise the king on the critical question of how this Estates General should be organised. In particular, there was growing public anger about the ability of the first two Estates into which France was traditionally divided (the clergy and the nobility, in order of conceptual importance) to outvote the Third Estate (everybody else in France, but represented in public discourse by many influential and wealthy individuals). The Assembly's final decision on procedure, reported here, did nothing to assuage these concerns. As the duchess goes on to indicate, there was already considerable political momentum outside this Assembly for amplifying the voice of the Third Estate. Within weeks of the Estates General opening in 1789, Third Estate deputies (in cooperation with some members of the other two Estates) unilaterally declared themselves a 'National Assembly' and France had a Revolutionary representative body ready to reshape the political landscape.

Date and place of writing

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Themes

- National Politics
- Monarchy
- Public Opinion
- Nobility
- Religion

Letter

Paris. 13 December 1788

Having spent 35 days (since the 6th of November) discussing in each of their committees how the Estates General should be organised, the Assembly of Notables decided by a majority of at least two-thirds to abide by the arrangements from the last such meeting of the Estates General in 1614, and then formally acknowledged the completion of their duties to the king after hearing mass yesterday. The Third is not happy about this decision, and by that same evening a song was attacking the Assembly, accusing its members of only being interested in eating and sleeping.

The Third Estate is positioning itself to outmanoeuvre the monarchy just as much as the Clerical and Noble Estates. They gather together, Madame, in nearly all our provinces, and they present requests with many signatories – the one from Normandy, signed by 12,000 men, is not untypical. The Third wants to have as many votes in all state and provincial assemblies as the clergy and nobility combined, so that it can prevail over them and reduce the importance of the two pre-eminent Orders as much as possible.

Source

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