

The Opening of the Estates General

Summary

The Estates General was the national representative body called by Louis XVI to solve the state's financial problems. It was set up with ornate ceremony in early May 1789, but its elected deputies soon bypassed the monarchy's original plans and instead paved the way for a political Revolution. The duchess contrasts the popularity of king Louis XVI with the unpopularity of queen Marie-Antoinette when they presented themselves together to the public before mass on 4 May, the eve of the Estates General opening. The duchess also observes the immediate difficulties faced by the king's principal minister Jacques Necker once the Estates General had formally opened. This was an early indication of the seismic political changes this unruly body would oversee over the next few weeks and months as it morphed into a new, Revolutionary institution: the National Assembly, soon to be renamed the National Constituent Assembly.

Date and place of writing

9 May 1789, Paris

Themes

- National Politics
- Monarchy
- Public Opinion
- Nobility

Letter

Paris. 9 May 1789

Three quarters of Paris came out to Versailles to watch this ceremony.¹ The king and queen were superbly decked out, and all their court who followed them were quite as magnificent as they could ever be. The noble deputies were nobly attired, mounted troops lined the route, and the French and Swiss Guards marched ahead of, behind, and in between each of the three Orders of deputies, creating a ravishing spectacle. The cries of 'Long live the king', and the applause for him, were unceasing. In contrast, the common people, who were there in numbers, appeared to insult the queen, and it is clear that she felt this acutely.

On Tuesday 5 May their majesties and the whole court made their way at midday to the hall in which the Estates General was to meet, where the deputies as well as

a large number of gentlemen and ladies were already seated. The king spoke well for a quarter of an hour, and more gracefully than people had witnessed up until this point. Then Monsieur Barentin the Keeper of the Seals made a half-hour speech, speaking so quietly that almost nobody could hear it. But Monsieur Necker read intelligibly for half an hour himself, and then had a secretary continue to read his speech for another two and a half hours. He was right to proceed in this way so that nothing was lost, because it was his speech that everyone wanted to hear.

The following day I met up with some well-informed people who told me that all three Orders were disgruntled about this speech, and the only effect those three hours have had is to make everyone suspicious of it.

It seems that our Director of Finances has been left in an awkward position by it all. People insist that he had already had the speech printed, but that now he has withdrawn it for corrections. But tell me, Madame, what you would do in his place, since he must know as well as I do that those hack writers who scribble as quickly as everyone else speaks have already been paid to copy his speech as he gave it, that they have it in their possession, and that if Monsieur Necker produces another version they will highlight all the changes from what he originally said. Yes, it is certainly tricky for somebody like him, who has made so many enemies!

Notes

1. The procession to mass on 4 May, the day before the opening ceremony took place.

Source

Archives nationales de France, F7 4775/1 (notebook 1, pp. 10-11).

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