

The French Revolution Begins

In 1789, the French were divided into three social groups called Estates. The First Estate was made up of Church leaders, and the Second Estate was made up of nobles. The Third Estate included everybody else, and more than 95 percent of the French people belonged to it. Like in other European countries, a king who had absolute power ruled the country. France also had a group of representatives called the Estates-General. That group was made up of representatives from each Estate.



France was having serious money trouble. The government had huge war debts to pay. Prices of goods were rising, and many people were out of work. Because of a bad harvest, there was very little food. In 1789, the country's economy was about to fall apart. King Louis XVI called the Estates-General to meet and come up with a solution.

At the meeting, representatives from the Third Estate said the best solution would be to change the government. Although the poorest people made up the Third Estate, it was the only one that had to pay taxes. The representatives thought France could start a constitutional government like the one the United States had just started. The new government would make the First and Second Estates pay taxes too. This would raise money for the country.

The First and Second Estates did not like this idea. By tradition, each Estate got one vote. So, the Third Estate was outvoted two to one by the other Estates. Third Estate representatives argued that, to be fair, each member should get a vote instead of each Estate. In the current government, the largest group of people had nearly no say in the government. King Louis said no to the proposed change.

Set on making changes, the Third Estate voted to rename itself the National Assembly on June 17, 1789. This action was the symbolic end of absolute monarchy and the beginning of representative government. Members of the National Assembly planned to write a constitution. But when they arrived at the meeting hall three days later, the doors were locked. Determined to meet, the delegates moved to a nearby tennis court. They swore to keep meeting until they had written a constitution. This famous pledge is called the Tennis Court Oath.

The king had to give in. He told the other two Estates to join with the Third Estate in the National Assembly. At the same time, however, King Louis was getting troops ready. He would tell the troops to force the National Assembly to stop meeting. The French Revolution had begun.