

THE TENNIS COURT OATH

The dissent of the Third Estate at the Estates-General was a clear challenge to the king's authority. Nevertheless it took Louis some time to act, scheduling (on Necker's advice) a *séance royale* involving all three estates for June 23th. On the evening of June 20th, members of the Third Estate found themselves locked out of the assembly hall.



Enraged at what they perceived as a deliberate act of political marginalization, they moved to a nearby royal tennis court and pledged an oath to each other not to disband until France had a constitution. “We are here according to the will of the people,” said the liberal noble Mirabeau, “and nothing except bayonets will drive us out”. They were joined by 151 clergymen and 47 nobles. The oath they drafted was signed by 577 members of the Third Estate with one abstaining; a handful of liberal nobles and clergymen also signed. The full text of the oath read:

The National Assembly, considering that it has been summoned to establish the constitution of the kingdom, to effect the regeneration of public order, and to maintain the true principles of monarchy; that nothing can prevent it from continuing its deliberations in whatever place it may be forced to establish itself; and, finally, that wheresoever its members are assembled, there is the National Assembly... It decrees that all members of this Assembly shall immediately take a solemn oath not to separate, and to reassemble wherever circumstances require, until the constitution of the kingdom is established and consolidated upon firm foundations; and that, the said oath taken, all members and each one individually shall ratify this steadfast resolution by signature.

“Jacques-Louis David recognized the gravity of the moment and the enthusiasm it released. He caught history in the making. Faces and bodies are frozen in an instant of the highest emotional intensity. The delegates are possessed by a common mission, which consists in preserving their newly won unity. The oath sworn in the tennis court outside the royal palace in Versailles... marks the beginning of the French Revolution. Language is at a loss as one tries to capture David's visualization of a unity manifesting itself as quantity.”

- Stefan Jonsson, historian

Faced with this determined revolution, Louis dithered: on June 23 he ordered the rebellious Third Estate to rejoin the Estates-General while promising reform and the abolition of some taxes. Then, on June 27th, he backed down completely and ordered the remaining nobility and clergy to join the National Assembly, thus giving it apparent legitimacy. The Tennis Court Oath – both a revolutionary act

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and an expression of popular sovereignty – had succeeded in forcing a royal back down. Conservatives in the First and Second Estates were furious about what had been surrendered by the king.

News of the National Assembly's formation and the apparent royal endorsement reached Paris and created great excitement and rejoicing. The bourgeois revolution seemed happily complete; however at the same time as he was dithering in the Estates-General, the king was also busy calling in troops to Versailles and Paris. By the end of June numbers of soldiers around the capital were approaching 20,000, a number much too high for just 'keeping order', as Louis claimed. It seemed as though the king would dissolve the National Assembly by force rather than acquiesce and surrender power to it ... how would the people of Paris respond to this? The scene was now set for the urban revolution.