The opening of the Estates-General, May 1789

The Estates General had last met in 1614 so three questions about its organisation needed to be answered before it could open in 1789.

1. How were the deputies to be elected? Louis and his ministers agreed on a complex system for election that varied across France. Crucially this was free from royal control, and the government did not put forward any candidates.
2. How would the number of deputies be divided among the different estates? Louis agreed that the Third Estate should have twice as many deputies as the clergy and nobility.
3. Would the Estates vote by order or by head (one vote for each and every deputy)? In 1614 they had voted by order. This meant the First and Second Estates, the clergy and nobility, could outvote the Third Estate by two votes to one. To a growing number of people this was unfair and unacceptable. They wanted voting by head. Louis (on Necker's advice) left this to the Estates to decide when they met. By leaving the question for the Estates to decide, Louis and Necker hoped to avoid alienating one side or the other but in so doing made what proved to be a fatal mistake. If voting by head had been agreed in advance the Estates might have got on with debating a reform programme rather than challenging the power of the King.

The elections took place against a backdrop of economic hardship. The harvest of 1788 had been disastrous after a freak storm in July devastated crops across northern France. Elsewhere the harvest was poor due to a long spring drought. In addition the early months of 1789 were the harshest in memory with snow and ice destroying crops across northern France and frosts destroying the vines and olive trees in the south. As a consequence, food prices steadily rose (they reached their highest point on 14 July 1789) and people had to spend an ever higher percentage of their income on food, leaving little to spare. This in turn led to urban unemployment because there was a sharp fall in demand for industrial products.

When the voting ended the Estates-General was made up of the following:

- The voting system produced a First Estate that was dominated by parish priests rather than the bishops of the Church.
- In the Second Estate the voting system excluded new nobles whose status was not hereditary; and the traditional *nobles de court* were outnumbered by deputies from poor but longstanding noble families. The noble deputies tended to be conservative in their views, but there were 90 liberal nobles, a third of the noble deputies.
- In the Third Estate the system effectively excluded peasants and workers because deputies were initially not paid. The Third Estate deputies were therefore lawyers, landowners and office holders. There were also a few nobles and clerics who were not elected by their own estates so could stand for election as Third Estate deputies.

At the same time as the elections the three orders in each constituency were asked to draw up a list of grievances and suggestions for reform to guide the deputies. These were known as the *cahiers de doléances* (book of grievances). For the First Estate these suggestions included higher stipends, access to the higher offices of the Church, greater Church control of education and a limit to the toleration of Protestantism. The Second Estate was willing to give up its financial privileges but was split over whether to come to terms with the demands of the Third Estate which wanted to reform taxation and to have a modern constitution. All three estates wanted a king whose powers could be limited by an elected assembly which would have the power to raise taxes and pass laws.

One influential document was 'What is the Third Estate?', a pamphlet written by Abbé Sieyès and published in January 1789. In the first months of 1789, 30,000 copies were distributed. The extracts below show that already there were those who wanted radical political change. Sieyès demanded that the estates vote by head and not by order, arguing for the central importance of the Third Estate.

> The plan of this work is quite simple. There are three questions that we have to ask ourselves:
>
> 1 What is the Third Estate? Everything.
> 2 What has it been until now in the existing political order? Nothing.
> 3 What does it want to be? Something. ...
>
> First we will see whether these answers are correct ...
>
> Who would dare to say that the Third Estate does not, within itself, contain everything needed to form a complete nation? It resembles a strong, robust man with one arm in chains. Subtract the privileged order and the Nation would not be something less, but something more. What then is the Third? Everything; but an everything that is fettered and oppressed. What would it be without the privileged order? Everything, but an everything that would be free and flourishing. Nothing can go well without the Third Estate, but everything would go a great deal better without the two others.

■ Now fill in the first row of your table. This stage is about the ideas being discussed and put forward.

Make more detailed notes which justify the summary in your table.

Such arguments and pamphlets had become common. According to William Doyle (2002) this '... was only the most eloquent among hundreds of no less vehement pamphlets denouncing the privileged orders ...'

Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès (1748–1836)

Sieyès was born into a bourgeois family and trained to be a priest for the Church. He was ordained in 1773 and served as secretary to the Bishop of Treguier. Influenced by the ideas of Rousseau (see page 24) and by the evidence of the problems he saw around him he became a supporter of reform. His influential pamphlet, 'What is the Third Estate?', brought him to political prominence in 1789 and he was elected as a deputy to the Estates-General. He was influential to begin with, drawing up the Tennis Court Oath and contributing to The Rights of Man. However, his opposition to the abolition of church tithes and belief in constitutional monarchy meant that his influence waned. Whilst he voted in 1793 for the execution of the King he kept a low profile during the Terror the following year. When asked afterwards what he had done during the Terror he replied, 'I survived.' After Robespierre's fall in 1794 he became influential once more and plotted the coup of Brumaire in 1799. Sieyès retired from public life after being outmanoeuvred by Napoleon who seized power for himself.

The deputies named themselves the National Assembly, June 1789

The Estates-General formally met at Versailles on 5 May. At this critical point Louis and his ministers failed to set the agenda. Louis was unsure what to do and lacked confidence in Necker, partly because Marie Antoinette and his brother Artois were so critical of his decision to accept Necker at all. So no programme of action was put forward for the deputies to discuss and no mention was made of a new constitution, something that all the *cahiers* had demanded. Necker talked of making taxation fairer but gave no details. So the initiative lay with the deputies and it was the Third Estate who took the initiative.

The three estates were to meet separately but the Third Estate argued that all deputies needed to have their election returns verified in a common session of all three estates together. Meeting together would set a crucial precedent for future discussions and create the likelihood of voting by head rather than by order. The nobility were against this and voted by 188 to 46 to meet as a separate order, as did the clergy, but by a much narrower margin, 133 to 114. Meanwhile the 580 deputies of the Third Estate refused to do anything until the other two orders joined them. For a month there was deadlock. Louis, mourning the death of his son the Dauphin on 4 May, was inactive.

Then came a vital week. On 10 June the Third Estate agreed to a proposal by Sieyès that they begin verifying deputies' credentials even if the other two estates did not join them. On 13 June the first three parish priests joined them, to great acclaim. In the following days a further sixteen priests joined and on 17 June the deputies of the Third Estate voted by 490 to 90 to call themselves the National Assembly. The importance of this was that they were claiming to represent the French nation. They also decreed that the collection of taxes should stop if they were dissolved. This claim to control taxation was a direct challenge to the King. Two days later the clergy voted by 149 to 137 to join the Third Estate, though not all did so immediately.

Faced with this challenge to his authority Louis tried to regain the initiative by holding a *séance royale* (Royal Session) attended by all three estates. The preparations involved the closure, without explanation, of the Third Estate's (now the National Assembly's) meeting room. Furious at what they saw as a despotic act the deputies moved to a nearby **tennis court** and took an oath, known ever since as the Tennis Court Oath:

As you can see on page 50 this was not a lawn **tennis court** but a court used for the game of 'real tennis'.

'We swear never to separate ourselves from the National Assembly, and to reassemble wherever circumstances require, until the constitution of the realm is drawn up and fixed upon solid foundations.'

This was a critical moment. The National Assembly was claiming that Louis did not have the power to dissolve it. Just one deputy voted against. More clergy joined them and on 22 June the first two noble deputies did too!

What would Louis say in the *séance royale*? He had three options.

2. Should I do what my younger brother the Comte d'Artois, my wife and other hardliners advise, and disband the National Assembly, by force if necessary? My Minister of War (Comte de Puységur) has on his own initiative reinforced the garrisons around Paris.

1. Do I adopt a conciliatory approach as Necker advises?

3. Or do I tell the deputies what I will and will not accept?

Louis chose the third option. He was still grieving over the death of his son and faced by the opposing arguments of Necker and Artois tried to steer a course somewhere in between. He offered some concessions on taxes but declared that the decrees of the National Assembly on 17 June were unacceptable to him and therefore void. After his departure the deputies were ordered to return to their separate rooms. As the Third Estate deputies wavered, one of them, the Comte de Mirabeau, took the lead saying, '... we shall not stir from our places save at the point of a bayonet.' When he heard this Louis reportedly said, 'Oh well, let them stay.'

In the following days, popular opinion turned against the privileged classes. There was rumour that Parisians were going to invade Versailles. In this climate Louis' hard-line advisers argued for a military solution. Meanwhile more clergy and nobles joined with the Third Estate in the National Assembly until by 27 June it numbered 830. At that point Louis ordered the remaining clergy and noble deputies to join the Third Estate deputies. A visiting Englishman, Arthur Young, said of the significance of Louis' decision, 'The whole business seems over, and the revolution complete.' Louis had a different view. He thought he was buying time to gather more troops around Paris.

■ Now fill in the second row of your table. Does the rumour of an invasion by Parisians seem strong enough to be termed a threat of violence?

Make more detailed notes which justify the summary in your table.

Revolt in Paris – the fall of the Bastille, July 1789

In the last week of June, Louis took action and moved more troops into the Paris/Versailles area. These were **foreign** (Swiss and German), rather than French regiments. It was clear to all that he was planning to dissolve the National Assembly, using force if necessary. By the 11 July Louis had over 20,000 troops and this made him feel strong enough to dismiss Necker. Whilst Necker was very popular with the people Louis did not want to follow his reforming policies.

The French army recruited Frenchmen but also had regiments made up of **foreign** mercenaries, in this case Swiss and German. Why do you think Louis moved these rather than French regiments?

When news of Necker's dismissal reached Paris on the 12 July it inflamed an already tense situation. High food prices in the city had triggered rioting and Necker was seen as the minister to solve the economic crisis. Meanwhile the King's opponents, those in favour of reforms, (both within and outside the National Assembly) were actively working against him through speeches, pamphlets and meetings, funded, it was said, by the Duc D'Orléans.

The trigger for armed revolt was the oratory of Camille Desmoulins, a pro-reform street speaker and pamphleteer, one of many funded by the Duc D'Orléans. He jumped onto a table outside the Café Foy in the garden of the Palais Royal to announce to the crowd that Necker had been dismissed. Apparently losing his stammer in his excitement, Desmoulins stirred the emotions of the people, calling on them to, '... take up arms and adopt cockades by which we may know each other' and claiming that a massacre of the supporters of reform was being prepared. He plucked leaves from a chestnut tree making green the colour for identifying the supporters of liberty. Drawing a pistol, Desmoulins declared that he would not fall into the hands of the police alive. The crowd hailed him as a hero and protectively carried him off.

People armed themselves by breaking into gunsmiths' shops. There were clashes with royal troops (German cavalry) in the **Tuileries** gardens, the hated **custom posts** around the city were attacked and there was looting and attacks on individuals. When the Gardes-françaises were ordered to withdraw from Paris many disobeyed and joined the people. That evening the **Paris electors** met to set up a citizen's militia drawn from the bourgeoisie to maintain order. Next day, the 13 July, barricades were set up to stop any more royal troops entering the city. Back in Versailles the National Assembly called for the removal of all troops from Paris.

Tuileries
A royal palace in Paris (see map on pages 36– 37)

custom posts
Places which levied taxes on goods coming into the city

Paris electors
Men entitled to vote in elections for the Estates-General

Royal troops

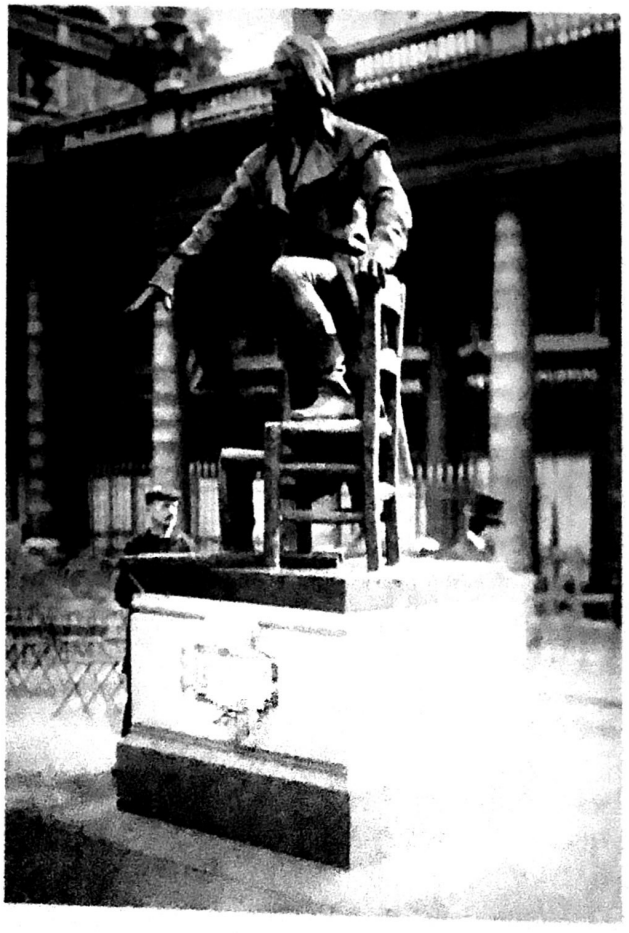
Gardes-françaises – French regiment

Royal body guard – Swiss regiment

German cavalry

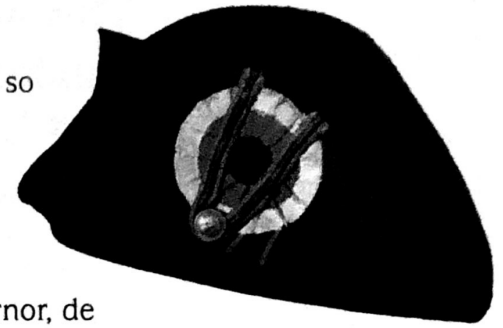
Revolutionary troops

National Guard, formerly citizen's militia



◁ Desmoulins' actions were originally commemorated by this statue but in 1941 the right wing French (Vichy) government which collaborated with Nazi Germany passed an order that inferior public works of art could be melted down for the war effort. The statue of Desmoulins was melted, as were statues of other revolutionary heroes Marat, Rousseau and Voltaire. Meanwhile over 8000 copies of the Marxist French historian Georges Lefebvre's *The Coming of the French Revolution* (1939) were ordered to be burned, a clear example of a regime trying to erase a history it found inconvenient.

On the 14 July 1789 the people of Paris seized control of the arsenal, Les Invalides, and took 28,000 muskets and 20 cannon. They still needed gunpowder and cartridges stored in the Bastille so they went there. The Bastille was a royal fortress and prison, a powerful symbol of royal power (see page 4). As the crowds massed around the Bastille royal troops in the city were withdrawn to the Champs de Mars, south of the River Seine. Their officers and commander knew they could not rely on their soldiers to fire on the crowds. Meanwhile at the Bastille the governor, de Launay, refused to hand over any gunpowder. At the time the crowd was not intending to attack but when a group got into the inner courtyard de Launay panicked and ordered his men to open fire, killing 93 people. The people, supported by the Gardes-françaises, then used cannon fire on the defenders of the Bastille. De Launay surrendered and was promptly murdered by the crowd and his head paraded through the streets on a pike.



△ **In the early stages of the Paris revolt people wore red and blue cockades, the colours of Paris. To this Lafayette added the Bourbon white to give France the red, white and blue.**

Those who stormed the Bastille were not the bourgeois middle classes who had led the protests against the monarchy but the *sans-culottes* (see page 38). Something like 250,000 Parisians were involved. This was the first and most famous of the ***journées*** which occurred during the Revolution.

Louis had lost control of Paris. His commanders told him that his troops could not be relied on to go into action in the city. On the 15 July, he and his brothers visited the National Assembly in Versailles to announce that he was withdrawing all troops from Paris and Versailles. In Paris the electors formed themselves into the new revolutionary council, the Commune, elected the deputy Jean-Sylvain Bailly as Mayor, turned the citizen's militia into the National Guard and appointed Lafayette as its commander. They were anxious to keep the *sans-culottes* under control.

journée
A day of popular action and disturbance linked to great political change

Louis now had to share his power with the National Assembly. He recalled Necker and on the 17 July visited Paris where he recognised the legality of the Commune and the National Guard. He even wore the red and blue cockade of the Revolution in his hat. The significance of this was not lost on others.

Amongst outside observers the British Ambassador wrote, 'The greatest revolution that we know anything of has been effected with ... the loss of very few lives. From this moment we may consider France as a free country; the King a limited [that is, constitutional] monarch and the nobility as reduced to a level with the rest of the nation'.

The US commercial agent Gouverneur Morris wrote, 'You may consider the Revolution to be over, since the authority of the King and the nobles has been utterly destroyed'.

Meanwhile the Comte d'Artois, Louis's youngest brother, had left Versailles on his journey into exile. He clearly believed the royal cause was lost, as did the many other nobles who emigrated in the days and weeks ahead. One émigré who did not manage to leave was Bertier de Sauvigny, intendant of Paris. He and his father-in-law Foulon were seized by the crowds and accused of trying to starve the city. Without trial they were lynched from lanterns, decapitated and their heads (mouths stuffed with straw) paraded through the streets on pikes. The National Guard was powerless to prevent this.

■ Now fill in the third row of your table. Remember when you fill in the **Methods** column that it is the revolutionaries and not the King that you are looking at, even though Louis was clearly considering the use of violence.

What is the major change shown in your table?

The abolition of feudalism and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, August 1789

July was not just a momentous month in Paris, but throughout France. Once Paris had acted, other towns felt confident enough to act. The Ancien Régime municipal corporations that ran towns were challenged for failing to deal with grain shortages. They were overthrown and replaced by revolutionary committees (in a few towns they worked alongside each other). This was frequently accompanied by violence. In Strasbourg the town hall was sacked. In Rouen grain stores were pillaged. So in the towns too the authority of the King was gone and the majority of his intendants abandoned their posts. These new revolutionary committees were composed of lawyers, property owners, and, in industrial centres, businessmen too, the bourgeoisie. Most towns set up a National Guard with twin objectives, to control the rioting and disorder and to prevent counter-revolution. In some places this had happened even earlier. In Marseilles in March a citizen's militia had been set up, and this was copied in other southern towns.

In the countryside unrest and violence had begun earlier. The bad harvest of 1788 had led to great hardship for the peasants as bread became expensive and scarce. In January 1789 there had been unrest in Franche-Comté which spread, in February, to Dauphiné and Provence. What began as sporadic attacks on grain storehouses and people who collected the feudal dues, by April had become more organised and targeted at landowners because peasants were suffering as grain shortages worsened. The calling of the Estates-General raised hopes and kept violence in check until July. Then news of the King's surrender and the defeat of the nobility were seen as a signal by the peasants to take action.

▽ The spread of the Great Fear.

The Great Fear began, so called because of the panic amongst peasants due to rumours that gangs of brigands had been hired by fleeing aristocrats to take revenge by destroying the harvest. Peasants armed themselves and turned their attacks against the nobility. The hated symbols of feudal power, the bread ovens, dovecots and wine presses were destroyed. So too were the documents that recorded feudal obligations. Chateaux were burned but very few people, nobles or their agents, were killed. For example, in the Dauphiné généralité nine chateaux were burned, 43 pillaged and the archives of 13 destroyed.

News of the events in the countryside reached the National Assembly in Paris, causing great concern for the deputies. They wanted the rural revolt ended but did not want to call on royal troops to crush the peasants in case the King used the troops against the Assembly. Instead, the deputies decided to end the revolt and gain the support of the peasants by giving them what they wanted, the abolition of feudalism.

The Deputies' plan was that on the evening of 4 August, when the assembly would be sparsely attended, a liberal noble, the Duc d'Aiguillon, would propose the abolition of aspects of feudalism such as feudal dues and labour services. But before he could speak, another noble, the Vicomte de Noailles, made his own proposals. Their two similar proposals changed the atmosphere in the Assembly. Deputies stepped forward in a patriotic fervour to give up one privilege after another. But old scores were settled too. Country nobles made sure that the courtiers lost their pensions and sinecures. The Bishop of Chartres proposed the abolition of the feudal right of hunting (beloved by nobles) whilst the Duc du Châtelet proposed the abolition of tithes. By the time the session ended at two in the morning the old order had been swept away. Étienne Dumont, an eyewitness, commented, 'A contagion of sentimental feeling carried them away'.

In the days that followed, the details behind the sweeping changes were debated, ending with the August Decrees published on 11 August. The Decrees declared that:

- feudal rights on people (serfdom) were abolished and those on property were to be replaced by a money payment
- tithes, hunting rights, *corveés*, seigneurial courts, venality of office, provincial and municipal privileges were all abolished
- all citizens were to be taxed equally
- all were eligible for any office in Church, state or army.

These decrees formally dismantled the Ancien Régime. The next task facing the deputies was to draft a constitution to replace it.

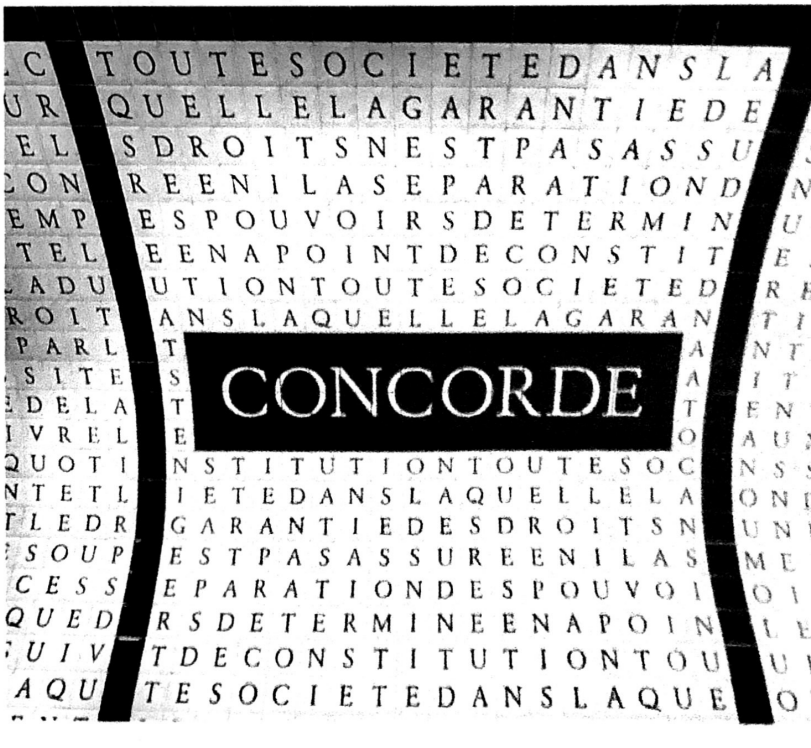
The first step was the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, published by the National Assembly on 26 August, a document of just 800 words. The deputies saw it as the basis for a new constitution. Its seventeen articles included the following extracts.

1. Men are born, and always continue, free ...
2. Rights of man; ... are liberty, property, security, and the resistance of oppression.
3. The nation is essentially the source of all sovereignty; ...
4. Every man presumed innocent till he has been convicted, ...
5. No man to be molested on account of his opinions, not even ... religious opinions, ...
6. ... every citizen may speak, write and publish freely, ...
7. Taxation ... ought to be divided equally among the members of the community, according to their abilities.

Three days later the deputies passed a decree to re establish free trade in grain, a measure designed to keep the price of bread down.

■ Now fill in the fourth row of your table. In your notes make sure you provide detail of the changes to the Ancien Régime and assess how radical the Declaration was.

▽ **Concorde Paris metro station line 12 is decorated with small ceramic tiles, each containing a single letter, which together spell out the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. What might this mural suggest about the French and their relationship with their history?**



The October Days

The deputies who drafted the August Decrees and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen knew that they needed the agreement of the King. In a letter to the Archbishop of Arles Louis seemed undecided. On the one hand he praised, 'the first two orders of the state [the clergy and the nobility]. They have made great sacrifices for the general reconciliation, for their *patrie* and for their king'. However, he also wrote, '... I will never consent to the despoliation of my clergy and nobility ... I will never give my sanction to the decrees that despoil them, ...' Meanwhile the National Assembly debated whether the King should have the right to veto decrees. On 11 September it voted to allow the King a suspensive veto, where he could delay laws passed by the National Assembly for up to four years but not veto them completely. Clearly they were still intent on establishing a constitutional monarchy, not a republic.

In Paris, Louis' refusal to approve the August Decrees increased tension. Mayor Bailly and the Commander of the National Guard, Lafayette, were struggling to maintain law and order, especially as the price of bread, after falling in August, had risen again. The frequent bread shortages triggered riots. At the same time journalists like Desmoulins and Marat reported on the debates in the National Assembly and portrayed the supporters of a royal veto as unpatriotic and as not trusting the people. They called for unreliable deputies (those they disagreed with) to be purged, threatened aristocrats with lynching and advocated direct action by the people.

In this atmosphere of mistrust Louis took the decision to increase his protection by summoning the loyal **Flanders regiment** to Versailles. Their arrival gave him the confidence to write to the National Assembly to say that he would accept some, but not all, of the August Decrees. On the 4 October he also voiced his reservations about the Rights of Man.

The **Flanders regiment** comprised French soldiers who had the reputation of being very well disciplined and reliable troops.

The deputies felt betrayed by the King's actions and people all over Paris believed there was a counter-revolutionary attempt to starve the city. Rumours circulated of a banquet at Versailles to celebrate the arrival of the Flanders regiment which had resounded with unpatriotic songs and toasts and where revolutionary cockades were trodden underfoot. Holding a banquet in such hard times seemed a provocation in itself. On the morning of 5 October women from around the city marched to the **Hotel de Ville** and seized several hundred muskets and two cannon. The men of the National Guard made it clear they would not fire on the women. Then the women set off for Versailles in pouring rain shouting that they were coming for 'le bon papa', Louis. Seven thousand of them reached Versailles that evening and the deputies of the National Assembly had no choice but to welcome them. A deputation then went on to see the King and he was quick to agree to the August Decrees.

Hotel de Ville
Town hall (in this case, of Paris)

Louis now faced another decision. Should he fight or run away, choices suggested by **Saint-Priest** or should he stay, which Necker advised. In the end he decided it was his duty to stay but he sent his other brother, the Comte de Provence, to the safety of exile.

Francois, Comte de **Saint-Priest**, was a soldier and Minister in charge of the Royal Household.

◁ *A Versailles, a Versailles* the women's march on Versailles, an anonymous contemporary print.

Later that evening Lafayette and 20,000 National Guardsmen arrived in Versailles, having marched in the rain after the women. Lafayette tried to calm the explosive situation and asked the King to return to Paris with the people, which was what the National Guard wanted. The next morning (6 October) the crowd broke into the palace and were fired on by Swiss Guards acting as royal bodyguards. Two Swiss guardsmen were killed, their heads paraded on pikes, and the Queen narrowly escaped capture, perhaps murder, before the National Guard took control of the situation. Lafayette stopped the killing of any more Swiss guards and protected the royal family. He persuaded the King to appear on a balcony and announce he would come to Paris. Later that day the King and Queen and their family were escorted in their carriage back to Paris by the National Guard and by the people. With them went the deputies of the National Assembly.

The result of this second *journée* was that both King and National Assembly were forced to stay in Paris, so putting them in the power of the people of the city. It had been just five months since the Estates-General had met but in those five months the political system of France had changed dramatically.

■ Now fill in the final row of your table. In your detailed notes think about whether the King's actions had been a response to violence or had caused more violence.

■ Concluding your enquiry

Look back over your completed table and notes.

1. How much did the aims of the revolutionaries change?
2. When did violence develop and why did it increase?
3. Who was the driving force behind the Revolution – peasants, clergy, nobles, bourgeoisie, *sans-culottes*?
4. To what extent was this a Parisian revolution?
5. What sort of revolution was taking place at different times during the year?
6. Write a brief answer in about 250 words to the question: 'What sort of revolution took place in 1789?'
7. Historians have suggested different dates for the outbreak of the Revolution. Which would you choose – 17 June, 14 July, or 6 October – or another date?