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Introduction 5 May 1789

It was a fine day and the hall, despite its size, soon filled up. The deputies of the clergy, the nobility and the Third Estate sat in the middle, spectators from Paris in boxes round the sides. The King arrived at one o'clock. He sat facing the deputies 'in all the pomp of Majesty', on a golden throne covered in fleurs de lys. The Queen, dressed in violet and silver and covered in diamonds, was one step lower. Beside and in front of them were the royal family, the court, guards and members of the government. It was the opening of the States General at Versailles on 5 May 1789. France was in ecstasy, convinced it was about to enter a new age of liberty and prosperity. Louis XVI's speech was interrupted with repeated cheers of *Vive le Roi!* Even the long analysis of the budgetary deficit by his minister Necker met with applause.[1]

The principal figures at the opening of the States General, Louis XVI, Necker, Mirabeau, the deputies of the three estates, have often been described. However, one group has been ignored. The court officials who escorted the King and surrounded his throne, people such as the *premiers gentilshommes* and *capitaines des gardes*, the *grand écuyer* and the *grand maître des cérémonies* have not found a historian. The court was one of the largest institutions in France, the States General met in rooms belonging to one department (the *menus-plaisirs du Roi*) and organised by another (the *cérémonies*), yet the court remains an enigma. A recent work, *La Cour de France*, by M. Solnon, stops in

[1] Gouverneur Morris, *A Diary of the French Revolution*, 2 vols., 1939, I, 68–9 and n., entry for 5 May 1789, letter to Mrs Robert Morris; Marquis de Ferrières, *Correspondance inédite*, 1932, p. 45, letter to Madame de Ferrières, 6 May 1789; Madame de Laage, *Souvenirs*, Evreux, 1869, p. lxxxvii, letter of 13 May 1789.

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More information

1789. To explore the court of France in the years after 1789, when it had to face new challenges and learn to play a new role, is the purpose of this book.

Language is one reason why the court remains a mystery. The word court has never been precisely defined. It could mean the royal households, the people who had been presented at court or simply the act of paying court. It was also used, often in a pejorative sense, for the government or the king. Politicians like Barnave were eager to deny their 'liaisons with the court' during the revolution. In this book, however, 'the court' will be taken to mean the personal households of the monarch and his family, and the palaces and what happened in them. To explore this magnetic field, which attracted some of the most important events and people in France, will shed light on the fate of the crown of France and the nature of the revolution.

Even the smallest detail about the court can be revealing. Every schoolchild knows that Louis XVI wrote *rien* in his agenda for 14 July 1789. It is less well known that in the private language of the court, as Madame de Staël explained to Gustavus III of Sweden, the word *rien* simply meant that the King was staying in his own apartments, reading or working with his ministers, rather than going out.[2] It did not mean that he did 'nothing'.

[2] Madame de Staël, *Lettres*, 1962– , I, i, 139, letter of 11 November 1786 to Gustavus III.

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CHAPTER I

Revolutions

Tout se tient dans une monarchie; la cour, naturellement composée de ce qu'il y a de plus considérable dans la nation, est le lien nécessaire entre le peuple et le trône ... Enfin un tyran a des enemis, mais il ne manque pas de partisans, au lieu qu'un monarque sans cour est un grand arbre déraciné que le moindre coup de vent renverse.

Duc de Lévis, *Souvenirs et Portraits*, 1882

For centuries the court of France had been one of the most important institutions in Europe. It was the centre of power in France when France was the leading power in Europe. It was also the largest single influence on the manners and customs, the decorative arts, fashions and pleasures of the European elites. The court was to France what the army was to Prussia: the supreme source of national pride and a vital element in national identity. The court was so impressive that even the king's own cousins, the princes de Condé, were proud to serve there, as hereditary *grands maîtres de la maison du Roi.*

The accession of Louis XVI in 1774 introduced a new phase in its history. Like many monarchs of the day, for example his cousin Charles III of Spain and George III of Great Britain, Louis XVI disliked magnificence. Contemporaries praised 'that noble simplicity of tastes which characterises him and which he prefers to the vain adornments of splendour'. In contrast to Louis XIV and Louis XV, he expressly desired service at his court to be 'reduced to what was absolutely necessary'.[1] There was no obligation to attend the court and there were frequent economy drives. Positions were abolished in 1774, 1780 and above all 1787 and 1789. In all, perhaps one-third of those existing in 1750 disappeared during his reign.

[1] M. Genty, *Discours sur le Luxe*, 1783, p. 57; Duc de Lévis, *Souvenirs et portraits*, 1882, p. 266.

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The cost of the court fell from 37,650,000 *livres* in 1786 to 31,650,000 in 1788. The King himself checked the smallest details of the expenditure of the *petits appartements*, the department which was responsible for his private apartments and suppers. The stables, responsible for all forms of transport, were traditionally one of the most extravagant departments of the court. The number of horses in the King's stables fell from the stupendous total of 2,215 in 1784 to 1,195 in 1787.[2]

Social life at court was also becoming simpler, as it was in aristocratic society in Paris. There was a general relaxation in deference and display: the open house, the formal circle and the elaborate silk or satin *habit habillé* for men were going out of fashion. At the same time fewer people went regularly to pay their respects to the King at Versailles. They felt it was a waste of effort, since the royal family rarely talked to people paying court.[3] Louis XVI was a silent monarch, with few friends or favourites. In 1783, when he created the Duc de Croÿ Marshal of France, he did not say a word, 'as ceremonies bore the King'.[4] Courtiers were reduced to analysing the expression on his face or the duration of his silences: it was all they had to go on.

Marie-Antoinette could be charming when she wanted. But she also enjoyed making fun of people going to court, particularly the elderly. She preferred life among a group of friends, the *société de la Reine* which aroused so much envy, to holding court in her state apartments. At the Petit Trianon they enjoyed a more informal and more exclusive existence than was possible in the palace of Versailles. Amateur theatricals were among their favourite amusements. In August 1785, for example, the Queen played Rosine, the King's brother the Comte d'Artois Figaro and the Comte de Vaudreuil, *Grand Fauconnier de France*, Almaviva in Beaumarchais's *The Barber of Seville*: the King with a few courtiers and servants provided the audience.

[2] René-Marie Rampelberg, *Le Ministre de la maison du Roi Baron de Breteuil*, 1976, p. 49; Archives Nationales (AN) C (Papers of the Liste Civile) 222, *Dépenses des Petits Appartments depuis le Ier de juillet 1774 jusqu'au Ier de janvier 1776 du temps de Guimard*, with corrections by Louis XVI; Henri Lemoine, 'La Fin des écuries royales', *Revue de l'histoire de Versailles*, December 1933, pp. 182, 205.

[3] Duc de Croÿ, *Journal inédit*, 4 vols., 1906–7, III, 294, entry for 1776/7; M. A. de Lescure, *Correspondance secrète inédite sur Louis XVI, Marie-Antoinette, la cour et la ville*, 2 vols., 1866, II, 85, entry for 5 December 1786; Marquis de Bombelles, *Journal*, Geneva, 1977– , I, 138, entry for 13 August 1782.

[4] *Croy*, IV, 285, entry for 17 June 1783.

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The *société de la Reine* also met in the salon of the Duchesse de Polignac, the Queen's favourite and *gouvernante des enfants de France*: the Duc de Lévis, one of the most acute observers of the court, remembered enjoying 'a real country-house life' there in the years before 1789. People played cards, billiards or music, gossipped and criticised the Queen behind her back. The Duchesse de Polignac, frivolous, informal and kind, was one of the few court officials whom the King liked. She was a niece of the Comte de Maurepas, the most important minister at the beginning of his reign, and the King used her to keep the Queen amused and, as far as possible, out of mischief.[5]

However, the court remained a centre of hospitality and splendour for people outside the *société de la Reine*. On the King's instructions the Duchesse de Polignac entertained visitors to the court as well as her own friends. The Queen gave balls in the winter in wooden rooms erected in a palace courtyard. They could be very enjoyable. In January 1786, for example, there was a scare when a few hundred unemployed workers marched on Versailles. The palace railings were closed and the number of guards on duty doubled. But the King made a joke of the precautions and the Marquis de Bombelles wrote in his diary: 'This evening's ball at the palace was not at all affected by this ridiculous revolt; people danced with the greatest gaiety.' Nobody felt they were dancing on the edge of a precipice.

Indeed after the triumphant peace in 1783 at the end of the War of American Independence, the French monarchy seemed both strong and successful. Louis XVI was more popular than any king of France since Henri IV; and on special occasions his court was a very impressive sight. On New Year's Eve 1784 more people came to pay their respects to the royal family than anyone could remember. Whereas 177 women had gone to court in 1757 to congratulate Louis XV on surviving Damiens's assassination attempt, 241 went in 1785 to congratulate Louis XVI on the birth of his second son the Duc de Normandie (the future Louis XVII).[6]

[5] Philippe Huisman and Marguerite Jallut, *Marie-Antoinette*, 1971, p. 129; *Lévis*, p. 330; *Bombelles*, II, 105, 235, entries for 19 January 1786, 15 September 1788.

[6] *Bombelles*, II, 16, 77, 104 entries for 31 December 1784, 15 November 1785, 11 January 1786; Lescure, *Correspondance*, I, 553, letter of 27 April 1785; J. N. Moreau, *Mes Souvenirs*, 2 vols., 1901, I, 601, diary for 11 January 1757.

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These men and women all came from what was known as the *noblesse présentée* (it was also called the *noblesse de cour*, or *la cour* for short). For, although the court had been simplified, it had not changed its nature. Its formal social life was still confined to that section of the nobility sufficiently ancient or well connected (that is to say relations of ministers, marshals and *chevaliers* of the order of the Saint-Esprit) to have gone through the gruelling and expensive process of being presented at court. Rules for presentation had been tightened in 1732, when it had been decided that the applicant had to prove noble birth since 1400. On his accession Louis XVI had affirmed that he wanted to admit only 'the most distinguished nobility', with exceptions for those who had performed 'outstanding exploits'. New families did gain access: 30 per cent of the 558 individuals presented at court between 1783 and 1788 came from families which had not gone before. However, the *noblesse de robe* or legal nobility, and nearly all families whose nobility was recently acquired, continued to be excluded from formal receptions and entertainments at court; the bourgeoisie was not even considered.[7]

Chateaubriand could be presented, and was impressed by the pomp of Versailles and the grace of the Queen. But his brother, who was an officer of a *parlement* or law-court, was barred; others excluded were the future zealot of the counter-revolution the Comte d'Antraigues and the family of Alexandre de Beauharnais, the first husband of the future Empress Josephine.[8]

No other court possessed such an extensive and exclusive caste around the throne. Comte Alexandre de Tilly, a provincial noble who served as a page at Versailles, called the rules for presentation 'preliminaries which the other sovereigns of Europe would not have imagined in their wildest dreams'. When he went to the court of St James's, he noted that it was 'larger than at Versailles because it is easier to go there'. Moreover George III and Queen Charlotte *talked*. One Englishman, who had not received 'one single word from one of the Royal Family' in France, remarked in fury: 'our own King ... would speak civilly

[7] AN C 220, Louis XVI to Duc d'Aumont, 9 July 1774; François Bluche, *Les Honneurs de la cour*, 2 vols., 1957, *passim*.

[8] Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, 3 vols., Librairie Générale Française, 1973, I, 167, 174; Jacques Godechot, *Le Comte d'Antraigues*, 1986, p. 15; Jean Hanoteau, *Le Ménage Beauharnais*, 1935, p. 84.

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to even a French *captain*'. All nobles and all officials of the rank of councillor, and their wives, could be presented at the court of Sweden after Gustavus III reorganised it in 1778.[9] Official rank in the service of the monarch was beginning to replace birth as a condition of admission to the courts of Vienna and St Petersburg.

People who had not been presented at court were not completely excluded. The palace of Versailles was more open under Louis XVI than it is today. Anyone well dresssed had access to the state apartments. Members of the public could present petitions to the King on his way to mass or to the hunt. People of the rank of lieutenant-general, bishop and *premier président* and above could attend the King's *lever* and *coucher*. The King granted audiences freely.

However, formal presentation at court was a gratifying distinction in an age which regarded social life as both admirable and obligatory. Presentation was also a help to a career in the army, which is one reason why the rules were so resented. The famous military reformer the Comte de Guibert, who served on the Conseil de la guerre in 1787–9, attributed to the 'disastrous regulation of presentations' the fact that so many senior military commands went to members of the *noblesse présentée*. Because they had been presented to the King, which was a guarantee that they belonged to the traditional military nobility, they were considered eligible for military commands. The court of Louis XVI was a combination of contrasts, a bewildering mixture of exclusiveness and domesticity, military service and frivolity. In the spring of 1782 the return of colonels and *jeunes gens présentés* to their regiments from a winter of pleasure in Paris and Versailles was delayed. The reason was to provide the Queen with enough men of suitable rank to dance at the ball she gave in honour of the future Paul I of Russia.[10]

[9] Comte Alexandre de Tilly, *Mémoires*, 1965, p. 314; Sir Robert Murray Keith, *Memoirs and correspondence*, 2 vols., 1849, II, 30, Henry S. Conway to Keith, 19 November 1774; Karl Lofstrom, 'Le Costume national de Gustave III, le costume de cour et la présentation à la cour', *Livrustkammaren*, IX, July–August 1972, p. 143.

[10] Comte de Guibert, *Oeuvres militaires*, 5 vols., 1803, V, 209, *Mémoire adressé au public et à l'armée sur les opérations du conseil de la guerre*, 1789. For hostility to the rules for presentation from the *noblesse de robe* see for example AN 291 AP (Papers of the Président d'Aire) Barentin (a former *garde des sceaux*) to d'Aire, 28 July 1793; F. Barrière, *Tableaux de genre et d'histoire*, 1828, p. 267, Chevalier de Lille to Prince de Ligne, 26 April 1782, cf. *La France et la Russie au siècle des lumières*, Grand Palais, 1986, p. 117, Duc de Villequier to Vergennes, 20 February 1782.

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The court of Louis XVI was extravagant as well. It was larger than the central government. There were in all about 2,500 people in the King's household in 1789: in comparison there were approximately 660 officials in the government ministries (war, foreign affairs, finance, marine, justice and the *maison du Roi*), whose staff was divided between Paris and Versailles. The minister of the *maison du Roi* had supreme authority over the court (and waged an unending war with the heads of court departments to cut costs) and was in effect minister of the interior as well.

In addition, since the royal family in 1789 was exceptionally large, there were 12 other independent royal households: for the Queen; the King's aunts Madame Adélaïde and Madame Victoire; his sister Madame Elizabeth; his children the Dauphin, the Duc de Normandie and Madame Royale; his brothers the Comte de Provence (known as Monsieur) and the Comte d'Artois; their wives; and the children of the Comte d'Artois, the Ducs d'Angoulême and de Berri (like the King's two younger children they shared the same household). One tradition of the court of France was that every member of the royal family had an enormous household of his or her own, in order to emphasise their rank and grandeur. When the households of the Comtes de Provence and d'Artois were set up by Louis XV, the Duc de Croÿ rightly called them 'ruinous and larger than those of other sovereigns'. The total number of officials and servants in the court of France in 1789 was probably over 6,000.

The palaces also increased in number and luxury in the 1780s. Louis XVI had inherited the time-honoured trinity of Versailles, Fontainebleau and Compiègne, to which the entire court and much of the government moved for certain periods of the year. The court's annual visit to Fontainebleau during the autumn hunting season was particularly agreeable: it was said that if two friends had quarrelled they were bound to be reconciled at Fontainebleau. The ministers and the chief court officials entertained lavishly. Madame de Staël described the exaggerated laughter and craning necks of the courtiers straining to attract the Queen's attention at supper in the apartment of the Duchesse de Polignac or of the Princesse de Lamballe (plate 3). For the Queen had some of the influence once exercised by Madame de Maintenon or Madame de Pompadour.

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Partly because a precedent was set if the King granted a request, she was used by the government as a channel for promotions and favours at court, in the army and even in diplomacy. She was thought to be so powerful that she had her own party, nobles favourable to the Austrian alliance and supporters of its architect the former foreign minister, the Duc de Choiseul. The Polignac family and their friends obtained innumerable favours, including large sums of money, inevitably exaggerated by rumours: the Duc de Polignac became *surintendant des postes de France*. The King, however, rarely joined in the social life of his court: he spent the day hunting, reading, practising metalwork on his private forge and working with his ministers.[11]

The King also possessed smaller residences such as Marly, Choisy and La Muette. Nevertheless he bought the palace of Saint-Cloud between Paris and Versailles from the Duc d'Orléans in 1784 and Rambouillet from another cousin, his *grand veneur* the Duc de Penthièvre, in 1785. The first he gave to the Queen – the first time a queen consort of France had her own palace – the second was used as a sheep-breeding station and hunting-lodge. The King's brothers acquired estates in the Ile de France, Monsieur at Brunoy, Grosbois and L'Isle Adam, the Comte d'Artois at Saint-Germain, Maisons and Bagatelle, in addition to their palaces in Paris, the Luxembourg and the Temple. By 1789 the countryside around Paris resembled a vast park, dominated by the palaces, *châteaux* and pavilions of the House of Bourbon. Those that remain are still one of the glories of France, the equivalent in celebrity and popularity of the country houses of England.

All were refurnished in the style now known as Louis XVI. The King's simplicity of taste did not extend to his own furniture: it is among the most elaborate ever made, just as the service he ordered from the royal porcelain factory at Sèvres in 1784 is one of the finest and largest ever created. After 1784 the royal *garde-meuble* spent about 1,600,000 *livres* a year on furniture. There had been an economy drive and the court only represented about 6 per cent of government expenditure in 1789 (33,240,000 *livres* of 531,444,000, according to Necker). Nevertheless it remained the most luxurious in Europe.

[11] Clive H. Church, *Revolution and Red Tape*, 1982, p. 333; *Croÿ*, III, 51, diary for March 1773; Staël, *Lettres*, I, i, 139, letter to Gustavus III, November 1786.

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More information

Its chief rival, the court of the Holy Roman Emperor in Vienna, did not have the same all-pervading luxury. Its furniture and china, and all its residences except Schönbrunn, were second-rate. However the court of Vienna was in some ways more monarchical and elitist. The court of France was relatively domestic and informal. Its routine still revolved round the King's person. The *lever*, the ceremony when the King rose and dressed, and the *coucher*, when he undressed and went to bed, were the most important moments of the court's day. They were also the only opportunities to see the King apart from the Sunday receptions or, for a few favoured members of the *noblesse présentée*, his supper parties in his private apartments, where the food was said to be the best in France.

The *lever* and the *coucher* took place in the King's bedroom. Rank was shown by time not space, by when an individual was admitted to the bedroom (even the ordinary public was admitted when the King was not there), rather than by where he could go in the palace. The *entrées de la garde-robe, du cabinet* and *de la chambre* gave their holders varying times of access to the King's bedroom. The recipients show the relaxed character of the court. They included an astonishing mixture of princes, court officials, doctors, servants, colonels who had been presented and even women: wives of the most senior court officials and senior ladies-in-waiting. There was no system. Admission was decided by favour and domestic service rather than official rank. As the great Austrian diplomat Kaunitz noted with surprise, at the court of France there was no 'grading by antechamber, designed to give a high idea of the honour of approaching the person of the sovereign', such as could be found at his own court. Referring to this absence of distinctions of rank, Louis XVI when young had written 'everything is better regulated in the other courts of Europe'; but he made little change to the etiquette of his court after he ascended the throne.[12]

A further sign of the domestic nature of the court of France was the structure of the King's household. Some of its largest departments

[12] Papiers de la Famille de Thierry de Ville d'Avray (henceforward referred to as TVA), *Entrées chez le Roi 1756–1815*; Prince de Kaunitz, 'Mémoire sur la cour de France', 1752, *Revue de Paris*, August 1904, p. 844; Comte de Waroquier, *Etat de la France*, 2 vols., 1789, I, 94–5; Louis XVI, *Réflexions sur mes entretiens avec M. le Duc de La Vauguyon*, 1851, p. 179.

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