

originated as a so-called Private Society, formed in 1757 by a little group of scientists, some of whom were attached to the university. Charles Emanuel III had refused them official recognition, but his successor granted it. In 1783 the Academy held its opening session, and next year was given the hall of the former Jesuit College as its meeting-room, which the fellows redecorated with Masonic symbols. The Academy took its place in the international network of scientific societies, from Berlin to Paris, St Petersburg to London; its *Mémoires* circulated across Europe, and it enrolled leading foreign scientists as corresponding members: Benjamin Franklin, the pioneer in the study of electricity, Joseph Priestley, the chemist, Leonhard Euler, the mathematician, and Pierre de Laplace, the astronomer. Unlike Turin's private academies, however, it was an arm of the state; it had been coopted by royal patronage, to become the government's chief repository of scientific expertise, superseding the university. From the moment of its foundation it was called upon for advice on all manner of issues of military and industrial technology.

In 1787 the government requested the Academy's opinion on an urgent question: the crisis in the silk industry. Piedmont's principal export industry had been hard hit by competition from cheaper silk, imported from Asia, and by an epidemic of disease that had destroyed the crop of silkworms. Thousands of workers were thrown out of their jobs. The collapse of the silk industry was part of a growing economic malaise that was overtaking the region. Grain prices had been rising for the last decade and more. The harvests were bad in 1778 and 1783, forcing the city council to incur a heavy debt by purchasing grain; the supply was not keeping up with the city's needs. The harvest of 1788 was adequate, but the following winter turned bitterly cold. Thousands of beggars, many of them unemployed silk workers, were camping in the streets: the city was in the grip of a severe economic downturn. To give them some protection from the cold the municipality opened the cattle stalls outside the city gates. As the savage winter ended, news began to arrive of the momentous events taking place in France. The convocation of the Estates General in May 1789 marked the start of the revolution. A terrible decade of political conflict, war, and economic hardship had begun, which would bring down the Savoyard monarchy and end the Old Regime.

The news from France galvanized public opinion in Turin. The information in local and foreign news-sheets was soon supplemented by the arrival of the first émigrés fleeing the new order taking shape in France, who told horrific tales of a world turned upside down. Opinion at Turin was divided between those who supported the old order, sympathizing