# The August 4th decrees

Perhaps the first notable change was the virtual abolition of feudalism in the National Constituent Assembly’s famous August 4th decrees. This reform started not as an idealistic attempt to improve the lives of the peasants, but rather as a desperate attempt to quell them. In the weeks prior the peasants had been running amok in the countryside, burning the chateaux of the nobility, intimidating the holders of seigneurial rights and destroying their records. These actions themselves were not completely spontaneous, the peasants had heard rumours of the king mustering sections of the army to reinstall his authority by force. They were of distinct concern to the bourgeois-dominated National Assembly which saw itself, not the peasantry, as the main organ for revolutionary change. With the whole country threatened by disorder the options facing the Assembly were to either crush the peasant uprisings using the militia or the royal army – a dangerous response – or to appease them by addressing some of their grievances.

***“It is quite true that the abolition of ‘the general effects of the feudal system’… along with the various judicial and administrative reforms, entailed the destruction of seigneurial power and laid the foundations of a unified national state. But the terms of redemption turned the abolition into a compromise heavily weighted in favor of the aristocracy. In the end, the real cost was to be borne by the tenant-farmers and share-croppers. For although the peasants had been freed from the feudal system, they did not all benefit equally from their new liberty.” Alfred Soboul, historian***

The Assembly opened its session at 8pm on the night of August 4, 1789, hearing a draft proclamation for the restoration of public order. Led by a few liberal nobles like the Duc d’ Auguillon, the Assembly began to dismantle the framework of seigneurial feudalism. This took the form of decrees verbally given by noble members of the Assembly; one after the other, as if to outdo each other, they stood and voluntarily renounced their feudal rights: serfdom, the corvee, tithes, venality – all were voluntarily surrendered and abolished by individual assemblymen in a heightened mood of liberal euphoria. These changes went further than they had initially intended; one writer later described it as an “orgy of self-sacrifice” while Bailly stated that “the National Assembly achieved more for the people in a few hours than the wisest and most enlightened nations had done for many centuries”. The men of the assembly were hailed as heroes and medallions were struck to commemorate the event (see picture). Some, however, considered that too many social institutions and procedures had been swept away too quickly, without due consideration to what might replace them.

The August Decrees did indeed improve many aspects of France. They abolished the medieval concepts of nobility, privilege and feudal rights, creating a society based upon equality and equal opportunity (at least in theory). They did not go far enough for the peasantry however: some feudal taxes such as the champart were considered to be private property, so could only be cancelled by redemption – yet it was these feudal dues that were generally the most despised. A subsequent meeting of the Assembly on August 11 ratified some but not all of the proposals made a week earlier. The August Decrees were consequently a great step and a marvelous spectacle – but did not go far enough for most of the peasantry.

# The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen

On August 26th 1789, three weeks after the night-sitting that abolished feudalism, the National Assembly passed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. This landmark document presented to the new nation a summary of the ideas and principles that were dominant during this early phase of the revolution. Though it has legal and constitutional aspects, the Declaration is predominately about enshrining and protecting the natural rights of all men. Though politics and practice would often lead the French revolutionaries to ignore or depart from its high ideals, throughout the revolution the Declaration remain its highest inspiration. The words of the Declaration would form the preamble to the Constitution of 1791 and other constitutions; and many political clubs – including some of the radical groups – would identify themselves as ‘protectors’ of its values.

***“The August Decrees and Declaration of the Rights of Man represented the end of the absolutist, seigneurial and corporate structure of eighteenth-century France. They were also a proclamation of the principles of a new golden age. The Declaration in particular was an extraordinary document… Universal in its language and in its optimism, the Declaration was ambiguous on whether the propertyless, slaves and women would have political as well as legal equality, and silent on how the means to exercise one’s talents could be secured by those without education or property.” Peter McPhee, historian***

The Declaration itself was drafted by the Marquis de La Fayette. Lafayette was a moderate and his intention was for the Declaration to assist in the peaceful transition from absolutist regime to a constitutional monarchy. Since La Fayette had been a participant in the American Revolution he was well aware of its documentary cornerstones, like the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. And like these documents, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen drew much of its ideological content from the Enlightenment, and specifically from the work of John Locke, a British political philosopher who lived in the late 1600s. Locke’s 1690 work Second Treatise of Government was fundamentally concerned with natural rights, representative government and the importance of private property. To the bourgeois revolutionaries of 1789 – and to moderate nobles like La Fayette – these values underpinned ‘their’ revolution.

The Declaration is often compared to the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights, which were written and enacted only 12-24 months beforehand. This comparison is misleading for two reasons. Firstly, the American documents were constructed after the revolution, whereas when the French Declaration was created the revolution was not by any means finalised. The other significant point is that the Declaration is not intended to be a constitution as such: it does not provide a plan for government, outline a political system or define the allocation or separation of political powers. It is fundamentally a manifesto of principles, values and abstractions rather than a binding legislative document. So, while its ideals would remain constant throughout the French Revolution, they were interpreted and applied very differently by different groups. As the revolution progressed, the content of the Declaration would be used to suppress change and freedom, as well as to inspire and achieve it. - See more at: http://alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/declaration-rights-of-man-and-citizen/#sthash.6UlV6o6c.dpuf