# The August 4th decrees

Source: Alpha History

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. The ensuing weeks of revolt and destruction in rural areas became known as the Great Fear. 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. - See more at: <http://alphahistory.com/frenchrevolution/august-4th-decrees/#sthash.5sCm58vZ.dpuf>