

WOMEN'S MARCH ON VERSAILLES

In May of 1789, the Estates General began to consider reforms based on the "cahiers" presented by each of the Estates. Then in July, the Bastille was stormed, and in August the Paris Decrees passed, limiting the privileges of the nobility. The First and Second Estates privileges were further limited by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, modeled on America's Declaration of Independence. The Women's March on Versailles was a riot that took place during this first stage of the French Revolution. It was spontaneously organized by women in the marketplaces of Paris, on the morning of October 5, 1789. They complained over the high price and scant availability of bread, marching from Paris to Versailles. Their demonstrations quickly became intertwined with the purposes of revolutionaries who were seeking political reforms and a constitution for France. The Women's March on Versailles was prompted by the high price of bread, food scarcity, and by rumors that the Tricolor (French flag) of the revolution had been trampled on and derided by the royalist troops and Louis XVI on October 1 during a special reception for the King's guards.

On October 5, 1789 crowds of women began to assemble at Parisian markets. The women first marched to the Hôtel de Ville (type of city council) armed with kitchen knives and other simple weapons. Numbering over six thousand, the crowd seized muskets, swords, and other weapons. The women, now joined by some men as well, walked the distance from Paris to Versailles in about six hours. Among their makeshift weaponry they dragged along several cannon taken from the Hôtel de Ville. Boisterous and energetic, they recruited more and more followers as they surged out of Paris in the autumn rain. In their ambiguous but always aggressive poissard (fish market) slang they chattered enthusiastically about forcing the King to go back to Paris. Many spoke ill of the Queen, Marie Antoinette, with little restraint in calling for her death.

The Marquis de La Fayette, fresh from providing aid in the American Revolution, led over 15,000 National Guardsmen and a few thousand civilians to keep the crowd from turning in to an uncontrollable mob. By early the next morning, members of the mob stormed the palace, attempting to find the Queen's room. Several guards were killed, their heads cut off and paraded around on pikes (long spear like poles). La Fayette ultimately convinced the King to accede to the demand of the crowd, that the monarchy relocate to Paris. On October 6, 1789, the King and the royal family officially moved from Versailles to Paris under the "protection" of the National Guards, thus legitimizing the National Assembly. The march became a rallying point through the next stage of the Revolution. La Fayette eventually attempted to leave France, as many revolutionaries thought he had been too lenient on the royal family. He was imprisoned and later released by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1897.

August Decrees

In late July 1789, several thousand separate yet related peasant uprisings occurred throughout the countryside, a majority of them against property owned by the Second Estate. During this time, the deputies of the National Assembly debated reforming not just the economic system or the constitution but the very basis of French society. In a dramatic all-night session on 4–5 August, one deputy after another stepped forward to renounce for the good of the "nation" the particular privileges enjoyed by their town or region. By the morning deputies of all orders (estates) had proposed, debated, and approved even more reforms. In effect, they had decided to eliminate noble and clerical privilege, the fundamental principle of French society since the Middle Ages.

1. The National Assembly abolishes the feudal system entirely. They declare that among feudal and taxable rights and duties, the ones concerned with real or personal succession right and personal servitude and the ones that represent them are abolished with no compensation. All the others are declared redeemable, and the price and the method of buying them back will be set by the National Assembly. The rights that will not be suppressed by this decree will continue to be collected until they are entirely paid back.

2. The exclusive right of fuies [allowing birds to graze] and dovecotes is abolished. The pigeons will be locked up during times determined by the communities. During these periods, they will be considered prey, and anyone will be allowed to kill them on their properties.

3. The exclusive right of hunting is also abolished. Any landlord has the right to destroy or have someone destroy any kind of prey, but only on the land he owns. All administrative districts, even royal, that are hunting preserves, under any denomination, are also abolished. The preservation of the King's personal pleasures will be provided—as long as properties and freedom are respected.

4. All seigneurial justices are abolished with no compensation. Nevertheless the officers of these justices will go on with their duties until the National Assembly decides on a new judicial order.

5. Any kind of tithes and fees, under any denomination that they are known or collected . . . are abolished. . . .

Other tithes, whatever they are, can be bought back. . . .

6. All perpetual loans . . . can be bought back. Any kind of harvest share can also be bought back.

7. Venality of judicial fees and municipal offices is abolished. Justice will be dispensed at no cost. And nevertheless officers holding these offices shall fulfill their duties and be paid until the assembly finds a way to reimburse them.

8. County priests' casual offerings are abolished and the priests will not be paid anymore.

9. Financial, personal, or real privileges are abolished forever. Every citizen will pay the same taxes on everything.

10. . . . Every specific privilege of provinces, principalities, regions, districts, cities and communities of inhabitants, either in the form of money or otherwise, are abolished.

11. Every citizen, whatever their origins are, can hold any ecclesiastic, civilian, or military job.

Source: J. Mavidal and E. Laurent, eds., *Archives parlementaires*, 1st ser., 82 vols. (Paris, 1862–96), 8:378. Translated by *Exploring the French Revolution* project staff from original documents in French found in J.M. Roberts, *French Revolution Documents*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), 151–53.

Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, 26 August 1789

The deputies of the National Assembly faced the daunting task of composing a document that a majority could accept. The debate raised several questions: should the declaration be limited to general principles or should it include the significance of each article; should it include a list of duties; and what precisely were "the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of man"? After several days of debate and voting, the deputies agreed on seventeen articles. These laid out a new vision of government, in which protection of natural rights replaced the will of the King as the justification for authority. Many of the reforms favored by Enlightenment writers appeared in the declaration: freedom of religion, freedom of the press, no taxation without representation, elimination of excessive punishments, and various safeguards.

The representatives of the French people, constituted as a National Assembly, and considering that ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the rights of man are the sole causes of public misfortunes and governmental corruption, have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable and sacred rights of man: ... this declaration may always remind them of their rights and duties; ... being founded henceforward on simple and incontestable principles the demands of the citizens may always tend toward maintaining the constitution and the general welfare.

In consequence, the National Assembly recognizes and declares... the following rights of man and the citizen:

1. Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on common utility.
2. The purpose of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.
4. Liberty consists in the ability to do whatever does not harm another; hence the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no other limits than those which assure to other members of society the enjoyment of the same rights. These limits can only be determined by the law.
5. The law only has the right to prohibit those actions which are injurious to society. No hindrance should be put in the way of anything not prohibited by the law, nor may any one be forced to do what the law does not require.
8. Only strictly and obviously necessary punishments may be established by the law, and no one may be punished except by virtue of a law established and promulgated before the time of the offense, and legally applied.
9. Every man being presumed innocent until judged guilty, if it is deemed indispensable to arrest him, all rigor unnecessary to securing his person should be severely repressed by the law.
10. No one should be disturbed for his opinions, even in religion, provided that their manifestation does not trouble public order as established by law.
11. The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may therefore speak, write, and print freely, if he accepts his own responsibility for any abuse of this liberty in the cases set by the law.
13. For maintenance of public authority and for expenses of administration, common taxation is indispensable. It should be apportioned equally among all the citizens according to their capacity to pay.
17. Property being an inviolable and sacred right, no one may be deprived of it except when public necessity, certified by law, obviously requires it, and on the condition of a just compensation in advance.

Source: The materials listed below appeared originally in *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Lynn Hunt (Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), 77–79.