

## The Storming of the Bastille

By the summer of 1789, France was moving quickly toward revolution. There were severe food shortages in France that year, and popular resentment against the rule of King Louis XVI was turning to fury. In June, the Third Estate, which represented commoners and the lower clergy, declared itself the National Assembly and called for the drafting of a constitution, which they would demand the King accept.

Initially seeming to yield, Louis legalized the National Assembly but then surrounded Paris with troops and dismissed Jacques Necker, a popular minister of state who had supported reforms. In response, mobs began rioting in Paris at the instigation of revolutionary leaders.

On July 13, revolutionaries with muskets began firing at soldiers standing **guard on the Bastille's towers and then took cover in the Bastille's** courtyard when guards fired back. That evening, mobs stormed the Paris Arsenal and another armory and acquired thousands of muskets. At dawn on July 14, a great crowd armed with muskets, swords, and various makeshift weapons began to gather around the Bastille.

The administrator of the Bastille received a delegation of revolutionary leaders but refused to surrender the fortress and its munitions as they requested. He later received a second delegation and promised he would not open fire on the crowd. To convince the revolutionaries, he showed them that his cannons were not loaded.

Instead of calming the agitated crowd, news of the unloaded cannons emboldened a group of men to climb over the outer wall of the courtyard and lower a drawbridge. Three hundred revolutionaries rushed in, and the guards took up a defensive position. When the mob outside began trying to lower the second drawbridge, the guards were ordered to open fire. One hundred rioters were killed or wounded.

The guards were able to hold the mob back, but more and more Parisians were converging on the Bastille. Around 3 p.m., a company of deserters from the French army arrived. The soldiers, hidden by smoke from fires set by the mob, dragged five cannons into the courtyard and aimed them at the Bastille. A white flag of surrender was raised over the fortress. All of the guards were taken into custody, the gunpowder and cannons were seized, and the seven prisoners of the Bastille were freed.

The capture of the Bastille symbolized the end of the "***ancien regime***" and provided the French revolutionary cause with an irresistible momentum. Joined by four-fifths of the French army, the revolutionaries seized control of Paris and then the French countryside, forcing King Louis XVI to accept a constitutional government.

By order of the new revolutionary government, the Bastille was dismantled. On February 6, 1790, the last stone of the hated prison-fortress was presented to the National Assembly. Today, July 14—Bastille Day—is celebrated as a national holiday in France.

## Primary Source: Storming of the Bastille

What follows is a Paris newspaper account of the fall of the Bastille.

*First, the people tried to enter this fortress by the Rue St. The treacherous governor had put out a flag of peace. So a confident advance was made; a detachment of French Guards, with perhaps five to six thousand armed bourgeois, penetrated (broke through) the Bastille's outer courtyard, but as soon as some six hundred persons had passed over the first drawbridge, the bridge was raised and artillery fire mowed down several French Guards and some soldiers; the cannon fired on the town, and the people took fright; a large number of individuals were killed or wounded; but then they rallied (reassembled) and took shelter from the fire . . . meanwhile, they tried to locate some cannons; they attacked from the water's edge through the gardens of the arsenal (collection of weapons), and from there made an orderly siege; they advanced from various directions, beneath a ceaseless (perpetual or constant) round of fire. It was a terrible scene. . . . The fighting grew steadily more intense; from all directions they clambered onto the roofs or broke into the rooms; as soon as an enemy appeared among the turrets (smaller towers) on the tower, he was fixed in the sights of a hundred guns and mown down in an instant; meanwhile cannon fire was hurriedly directed against the second drawbridge, which it pierced, breaking the chains; in vain (ineffective or unsuccessful) did the cannon on the tower reply, for most people were sheltered from it; the fury was at its height; people bravely faced death and every danger; women, in their eagerness, helped us to the utmost (ultimate); even the children, after the discharge of fire from the fortress, ran here and there picking up the bullets and shot; [and so the Bastille fell and the governor, De Launey, was captured]. . . . Serene and blessed liberty, for the first time, has at last been introduced into this abode (house) of horrors, this frightful refuge (protected shelter) of monstrous despotism (tyranny) and its crimes.*

*Meanwhile, they get ready to march; they leave amidst (among) an enormous crowd; the applause, the outbursts of joy, the insults, the oaths hurled at the treacherous (disloyal) prisoners of war; everything is confused; cries of vengeance and of pleasure issue from every heart; the conquerors, glorious and covered in honor, carry their arms and the spoils (rewards) of the conquered, the flags of victory, the militia (private military) mingling (socializing) with the soldiers of the fatherland, the victory laurels (honors) offered them from every side, all this created a frightening and splendid spectacle (sight to see). On arriving at the square, the people, anxious to avenge themselves, allowed neither De Launey nor the other officers to reach the place of trial; they seized them from the hands of their conquerors, and trampled them underfoot one after the other. De Launey was struck by a thousand blows, his head was cut off and hoisted (lifted) on the end of a pike (pointed spear) with blood streaming down all sides. . . . This glorious day must amaze our enemies, and finally usher in for us the triumph of justice and liberty. In the evening, there were celebrations.*

[Source: quoted in Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization: A Brief History* (Belmont, CA: West/Wadsworth, 1999), p. 416.]

## 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.

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*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 fûies [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.

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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.