



German History in Documents and Images

Volume 2. From Absolutism to Napoleon, 1648-1815

Margrave Karl Friedrich von Baden, Proclamation of the Abolition of Serfdom in Baden
(July 23, 1783)

With this edict, Baden's ruler joined the contemporary Enlightenment-driven critique of serfdom and slavery by enunciating, in principle, the end of personal serfdom, which was still not uncommon in southwest Germany (if mainly a matter of fees levied on individual villagers subject to noble and state seigneurialism). But Margrave Karl Friedrich von Baden chose to let rents on land deriving from personal serfdom stand. The final dissolution of lord-subject legal relations in the countryside would have to wait for nineteenth-century liberalism.

We have now arrived at the long desired moment in which We are able to make certain changes to the state and financial constitution to free Our dear subjects from overly burdensome obligations. We have thus resolved to provide Our subjects with significant alleviation by immediately abolishing personal serfdom.

For the sake of clarity, however, concerning what consequences this liberation should have, We hereby declare that We—with no intention to provide compensation for the income which has stemmed from personal serfdom—decree throughout all lands which are subject to Our sole, direct jurisdiction and authority that personal serfdom shall be abolished on this very day and Our subjects in said territories are hereby legally free in their persons.

Yet, for the protection of Our lands and maintenance of good order and other necessary and useful public institutions, Our subjects remain as before obliged to provide both military service and uncompensated labor for public works, unless freed from these by special privilege.

Furthermore, Our subjects are forbidden from leaving Our territory, moving to any place beyond Our jurisdiction without prior permission, and serving in foreign military forces. Infractions shall incur the same penalties as were customary under personal serfdom. In regard to those who petition for permission to move away, We also reserve the right to impose all the fines previously collected for manumission or permission to move away and the like until We are able to reach a fair agreement with other cities and territories concerning freedom of movement.

Within Our own territories, on the other hand, We desire to abolish those prior duties which were paid to Us when passing between the territories of Durlach and Baden-Baden and also those collected for other movement from one district into another. Our subjects, including Anabaptists and Jews, provided they are under Our sole jurisdiction and sovereignty, are accordingly completely and totally freed from the following fees: 1. from estate taxes, with the exception of

the so-called *Lacherbengeldes*¹; 2. from toll-fees upon moving within Our territories]; 3. from taxes for manumission and export; 4. from the so-called *Landschaftsgeld*² in Our territory of Baden-Baden. Furthermore, 5. from the *Leibschilling* [annual tax on serfs]; 6. from the livestock levy (“head right” or “best head”³) to the extent that this obligation applies to individuals and not to certain properties and except in the case of such inheritance known as *Güterfall*, or however else it is called, with the sole exception of those towns which receive a percentage of the duties. The residents of these towns shall be granted the liberties outlined above only when said towns declare their intention to likewise abolish such fees. Until this time subjects who move into these towns shall also incur such obligations.

[. . .]

And with the rescinding of these burdens it is Our sole purpose to foster the good fortune of Our subjects and to demonstrate anew Our unchanging desire to fulfill Our duty as regent, to evidence Our benevolent and paternal [*landesväterlich*] attitudes towards Our subjects, and thus to display love, mercy, and grace. We are certain that our subjects will rouse themselves to be loyal, trusting, and devoted to Us and Our princely house and will redouble their efforts to increase the prosperity of the land.

You officials in the chancellery shall publish all of this and report to Us about its implementation and act accordingly yourselves. We graciously order you, treasury officials, from this day forward to refrain from collecting those fees which have been hereby abolished, and also to make appropriate note of this in your account books. On the other hand, in those subordinate cases in which We have preserved the manumissions and departure taxes, you shall continue to collect and to credit these loyally to us, in which case We are disposed to abide in graciousness toward you.

Decreed in Karlsruhe, July 23, 1783.

Source: Günther Franz, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte des deutschen Bauernstandes in der Neuzeit* [*Sources on the History of the Germany Peasantry in the Modern Era*]. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976, pp. 292–94.

Reprinted in Helmut Neuhaus, ed., *Zeitalter des Absolutismus 1648-1789* [*Age of Absolutism, 1648-1789*]. Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung, edited by Rainer A. Müller, vol. 5. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1997, pp. 434–38.

Translated by Ellen Yutzy Glebe

¹ A type of estate tax incurred when distant relatives inherited property. “Lacherben” means “laughing heirs,” i.e., those more likely to rejoice at their good fortune in inheriting than to truly mourn the deceased’s passing.

² A reference to a local tax imposed by the Baden estates.

³ A reference to the customary right of a seignorial lord to the best head of livestock among the deceased person’s holdings.