

Liberty Must Prevail at Any Price

Although other periods in history have recorded man's cruelty to his fellow human beings, one period that vividly demonstrates acts of inhumanity is the French Revolution.

Early days of the era saw men's heads perched on pikes and paraded before raucous mobs, but that was only a prelude to the wholesale murders that became known as the "Reign of Terror."

No longer were men and women punished for crimes against the people during the Old Regime. Now death came to anyone accused of anything, and in the case of one unfortunate who was dragged before a tribunal by mistake, for no reason at all. A seamstress who possessed a name similar to an accused prisoner, explained the mistake in identity to the tribunal, but the prosecutor waved her toward the tumbrel, saying: "Since you're here, we might as well take you."

The King and his Queen had gone to the guillotine, but it claimed former friends of the revolution as well. During the days of terror, October 1793 through July, 1794, nearly 3,000 executions took place in Paris, and about 14,000 in the provinces.

Explaining the necessity for the slaughters, Saint-Just, who regarded all dissidents as criminals, remarked: "liberty must prevail at any price."

Madame Roland, a friend of the Girondins, gazed at the statue of Liberty as she mounted the scaffold of the guillotine, and commented: "Oh Liberty, what crimes are committed in your name."

Hundreds of innocent people suffered, for crimes such as these:

"Jean Baptiste Henry, aged eighteen, convicted of having sawed down a tree of liberty, executed 6 September, 1793; Francois Bertrand, aged thirty-seven, convicted of having served sour wine, executed the same day condemned; Henriette Francoise de Marboeuf, aged fifty-five, convicted of having hoped for the arrival of the Austrians and Prussians, condemned and executed the same day. . . ."

As more and more victims were condemned, time between sentence and execution grew shorter. For some the guillotine was not quick enough. Joseph Fouche, a former teacher who had become one of the most dreaded of Jacobins, had over 300 condemned people mowed down by cannon fire.

"What a delicious moment," wrote an approving witness, to a friend in Paris. "How you would have enjoyed it . . . What a sight—worthy indeed of Liberty."

At Nantes, the Revolutionary Committee's agent was Jean Baptiste Carrier. He ordered two thousand condemned to be towed to the middle of the Loire River on barges which were then sunk. Most had been stripped naked, and bound in couples for the mass drownings. On occasions Carrier raved endlessly about the need to kill and kill.

In Paris, thousands of people went out regularly to witness the operations of what the deputy, J.A.B. Amar, called the "red Mass" performed on the "great

altar" of the "holy guillotine." They took seats around the scaffold, buying wine and biscuits to eat while waiting for the show to begin. Yet there were thousands more who had become "sick of blood."

The guillotine continued to mete out "justice" with steady regularity, and leaders of the Revolution went to meet it. Danton, one of the first, said prophetically, "Robespierre is bound to follow me."

During June and July of 1794, 1500 people were beheaded by the guillotine in Paris. Only a small portion of them were aristocrats. Less than nine in a hundred were of noble birth; about six percent were clergy. The rest, about eighty-five percent, were members of what had once been called the Third Estate.

While Robespierre, leader of the Revolution, witnessed none of the victims perish (he believed public executions brutalized the character of the people), he made no move to stop them. He believed the executions were necessary to maintain his position, for since he was more virtuous than other men, he alone could save the Revolution.

Others did not think so. The blood bath continued, and Robespierre was caught up in the whirlpool. As Danton had predicted on April 2, Robespierre was brought to the guillotine on July 28, and the next day most of his followers were executed. On July 31 the Committee of Public Safety was reorganized, and a reorganization of the Revolutionary Tribunal followed on August 10. The Reign of Terror had ended.¹

¹Hibbert, Christopher, *Days of the French Revolution* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1980), 224, 226-229.

3 The Jacobin Regime

In the summer of 1793 the French Republic was threatened with internal insurrection and foreign invasion. During this period of acute crisis, the Jacobins provided strong leadership. They organized a large national army of citizen soldiers who, imbued with love for the nation, routed the invaders on the northern frontier. To deal with internal enemies, the Jacobins instituted the Reign of Terror, in which Maximilien Robespierre (1758–1794) played a pivotal role.

It was not because they were bloodthirsty or power mad that most Jacobins, including Robespierre, supported the use of terror. Rather, they were idealists who believed that terror was necessary to rescue the Republic and the Revolution from destruction. Deeply committed to republican democracy, Robespierre saw himself as the bearer of a higher faith, molding a new society founded on reason, good citizenship, patriotism, and virtue. Robespierre viewed those who prevented the implementation of this new society as traitors and sinners who had to be killed for the good of humanity.

THE LEVY IN MASS

To fight the war against foreign invaders, the Jacobins, in an act that anticipated modern conscription, drafted unmarried men between eighteen and twenty-five years of age. They mobilized the nation's material and human resources, infused the people with a nationalistic spirit, and in a remarkable demonstration of administrative skill, equipped an army of more than 800,000 men. In calling the whole nation to arms, the Jacobins heralded the emergence of modern warfare. Following is the famous levy in mass decreed on August 16, 1793.

1. Henceforth, until the enemies have been driven from the territory of the Republic, the French people are in permanent requisition for army service.

The young men shall go to battle; the married men shall forge arms and transport provisions; the women shall make tents and clothes, and shall serve in the hospitals; the children shall turn old linen into lint [for dressing wounds]; the old men shall repair to the public places, to stimulate the courage of the warriors and preach the unity of the Republic and hatred of kings.

2. National buildings shall be converted into barracks; public places into armament workshops; the soil of cellars shall be washed in lye to extract saltpeter therefrom.

3. Arms of caliber shall be turned over exclusively to those who march against the enemy; the service of the interior shall be carried on with fowling pieces and sabers.¹

4. Saddle horses are called for to complete the cavalry corps; draught horses, other than those employed in agriculture, shall haul artillery and provisions.

5. The Committee of Public Safety is charged with taking all measures necessary for establishing, without delay, a special manufacture of arms of all kinds, in harmony with the *elan* and the energy of the French people. Accordingly, it is authorized to constitute all establishments, manufactories, workshops, and factories deemed necessary for the execution of such works, as well as to requisition for such purpose, throughout the entire extent of the Republic, the [artisans] and workmen who may contribute to their success. . . .

6. The representatives of the people dispatched for the execution of the present law shall have similar authority in their respective *arrondissements*, acting in concert with the Committee of Public Safety; they are invested with the unlimited powers attributed to the representatives of the people with the armies.

7. No one may obtain a substitute in the service to which he is summoned. The public functionaries shall remain at their posts.

8. The levy shall be general. Unmarried citizens or childless widowers, from eighteen to twenty-five years, shall go first; they shall meet, without delay, at the chief town of their districts, where they shall practice manual

¹*Fowling pieces* were light shotguns, so called because they were sometimes used for shooting wild fowl. *Saber* here refers to a type of bayonet, a rifle with a blade attached.

exercise daily, while awaiting the hour of departure.

9. The representatives of the people shall regulate the musters and marches so as to have armed citizens arrive at the points of assembling only in so far as supplies, munitions, and all that constitutes the material part of the army exist in sufficient proportion. . . .

11. The battalion organized in each district shall be united under a banner bearing the in-

scription: *The French people risen against tyrants*. . . .

14. Owners, farmers, and others possessing grain shall be required to pay, in kind, arrears of taxes. . . .

17. The Minister of War is responsible for taking all measures necessary for the prompt execution of the present decree. . . .

18. The present decree shall be conveyed to the departments by special messengers.

Maximilien Robespierre REPUBLIC OF VIRTUE

In his speech of February 5, 1794, Robespierre provided a comprehensive statement of his political theory, in which he equated democracy with virtue and justified the use of terror in defending democracy.

What is the objective toward which we are reaching? The peaceful enjoyment of liberty and equality; the reign of that eternal justice whose laws are engraved not on marble or stone but in the hearts of all men, even in the heart of the slave who has forgotten them or of the tyrant who disowns them.

We wish an order of things where all the low and cruel passions will be curbed, all the beneficent and generous passions awakened by the laws, where ambition will be a desire to deserve glory and serve the *patrie* [nation]; where distinctions grow only out of the very system of equality; where the citizen will be subject to the authority of the magistrate, the magistrate to that of the people, and the people to that of justice; where the *patrie* assures the well-being of each individual, and where each individual shares with pride the prosperity and glory of the *patrie*; where every soul expands by the continual communication of republican sentiments, and by the need to merit the esteem of a great people; where the arts will embellish the liberty that ennoble them, and com-

merce will be the source of public wealth and not merely of the monstrous riches of a few families.

We wish to substitute in our country . . . all the virtues and miracles of the republic for all the vices and absurdities of the monarchy.

We wish, in a word, to fulfill the intentions of nature and the destiny of humanity, realize the promises of philosophy, and acquit providence of the long reign of crime and tyranny. We wish that France, once illustrious among enslaved nations, may, while eclipsing the glory of all the free peoples that ever existed, become a model to nations, a terror to oppressors, a consolation to the oppressed, an ornament of the universe; and that, by sealing our work with our blood, we may witness at least the dawn of universal happiness—this is our ambition, this is our aim.

What kind of government can realize these prodigies [great deeds]? A democratic or republican government only. . . .

A democracy is a state where the sovereign people, guided by laws of their own making,

do for themselves everything that they can do well, and by means of delegates everything that they cannot do for themselves.

It is therefore in the principles of democratic government that you must seek the rules of your political conduct.

But in order to found democracy and consolidate it among us, in order to attain the peaceful reign of constitutional laws, we must complete the war of liberty against tyranny; . . . [S]uch is the aim of the revolutionary government that you have organized. . . .

But the French are the first people in the world who have established true democracy by calling all men to equality and to full enjoyment of the rights of citizenship; and that is, in my opinion, the true reason why all the tyrants leagued against the republic will be vanquished.

There are from this moment great conclusions to be drawn from the principles that we have just laid down.

Since virtue [good citizenship] and equality are the soul of the republic, and your aim is to found and to consolidate the republic, it follows that the first rule of your political conduct must be to relate all of your measures to the maintenance of equality and to the development of virtue; for the first care of the legislator must be to strengthen the principles on which the government rests. Hence all that tends to excite a love of country, to purify moral standards, to exalt souls, to direct the passions of the human heart toward the public good must be adopted or established by you. All that tends to concentrate and debase them into selfish egotism, to awaken an infatuation for trivial things, and scorn for great ones, must be rejected or repressed by you. In the system of the French revolution, that which is immoral is impolitic, and that which tends to corrupt is counterrevolutionary. Weakness, vices, and prejudices are the road to monarchy. . . .

. . . Externally all the despots surround you; internally all the friends of tyranny conspire. . . . It is necessary to annihilate both the internal

and external enemies of the republic or perish with its fall. Now, in this situation your first political maxim should be that one guides the people by reason, and the enemies of the people by terror.

If the driving force of popular government in peacetime is virtue, that of popular government during a revolution is both *virtue and terror*: virtue, without which terror is destructive; terror, without which virtue is impotent. Terror is only justice that is prompt, severe, and inflexible; it is thus an emanation of virtue; it is less a distinct principle than a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to the most pressing needs of the *patrie*.

In a series of notes written in the summer of 1793, Robespierre expressed his policy toward counterrevolutionaries.

{DESPOTISM IN DEFENSE OF LIBERTY}

What is our goal? The enforcement of the constitution for the benefit of the people.

Who will our enemies be? The vicious and the rich.

What means will they employ? Slander and hypocrisy.

What things may be favorable for the employment of these? The ignorance of the *sans-culottes*.¹

The people must therefore be enlightened. But what are the obstacles to the enlightenment of the people? Mercenary writers who daily mislead them with impudent falsehoods.

What conclusions may be drawn from this? 1. These writers must be proscribed as the most dangerous enemies of the people.

¹*Sans-culottes* literally means without the fancy breeches worn by the aristocracy. The term refers generally to a poor city dweller (who wore simple trousers). Champions of equality, the *sans-culottes* hated the aristocracy and the rich bourgeoisie.

2. Right-minded literature must be scattered about in profusion.

What are the other obstacles to the establishment of liberty? Foreign war and civil war.

How can foreign war be ended? By putting republican generals in command of our armies and punishing those who have betrayed us.

How can civil war be ended? By punishing traitors and conspirators, particularly if they are deputies or administrators; by sending loyal troops under patriotic leaders to subdue the aristocrats of Lyon, Marseille, Toulon, the Vendée, the Jura, and all other regions in

which the standards of rebellion and royalism have been raised; and by making frightful examples of all scoundrels who have outraged liberty and spilled the blood of patriots.

1. Proscription [condemnation] of perfidious and counter-revolutionary writers and propagation of proper literature.
2. Punishment of traitors and conspirators, particularly deputies and administrators.
3. Appointment of patriotic generals; dismissal and punishment of others.
4. Sustenance and laws for the people.

Abbé Carrichon THE GUILLOTINE

The Abbé Carrichon, who had promised to accompany several noble ladies to the guillotine, describes the journey of the death cart, carrying aristocratic victims, to the scaffold.

At last we reached the fatal spot. What I felt cannot be expressed. The moment was overwhelming. The idea of parting was too poignant. I could still see them full of health and able to do so much for their families, and in a moment they would be gone for ever. The carts halted before the scaffold and I shuddered as I looked. The horsemen and footsoldiers at once surrounded it and behind was a large circle of spectators, most of them laughing and ready to be amused by the tragic spectacle. I was in their midst, but how different my feelings! . . . I saw the chief executioner and his two assistants. He differed from them in looking much younger and resembling in his gait and his costume an unsuccessful dandy. One of the two assistants was remarkable for his size, his rotundity, the rose he had in his mouth, his coolness and the leisurely nature of his movements. His sleeves were turned up and his hair plaited and frizzed and he had strikingly regular features, unmarked, however, by nobility, which could

have served as a model to the great painters, for their portraits of executioners in their records of the martyrs.

One must admit that, either owing to a sub-stratum of humanity or by custom and the desire to get it over quickly, the sufferings of the victims were definitely mitigated by the business-like promptitude of the executioners, the care they took to get all the condemned persons down from the cart, before the executions started and to place them with their backs to the scaffold, so that they could see nothing. I felt they deserved some gratitude for this and also for the decorum they observed and their constantly serious expressions, which contained no trace of mockery or insult for the victims.

As the assistants were helping the ladies in the first cart to get down, Mme de Noailles looked round to find me. When at last she had caught sight of me, what messages did not her eyes now raised to heaven, now lowered to the

ground contain with their sweet, animated, heavenly expression. Sometimes they were fixed on me so purposefully, that they might have drawn attention to me had the tigers by whom I was surrounded been more observant. I pushed my hat over my eyes without losing sight of her and I heard her say in thought: "My sacrifice is accomplished. I leave my dear ones behind. But God has called me, as I firmly hope. I shall never forget them. Bid them a tender farewell from me, and receive my thanks. Adieu, adieu!" . . .

After the last farewells had been spoken, they came down. I left the place where I was standing and went across to the other side, while they were getting down the other condemned prisoners. I now found myself facing the steps to the scaffold against which, the first for execution, a tall old man with white hair was leaning. He had a kindly air and they said he was a farmer-general. Near him stood a lady of pious aspect whom I did not know: then came la Maréchale exactly opposite me. She was dressed in black and was sitting on a block of wood or stone with wide-open staring eyes. All the others were lined up below the scaffold on the side facing the Faubourg Saint-Antoine on the west. I looked for my two ladies, but could only see the mother standing in a simple, noble, resigned attitude with her eyes closed. She seemed no longer disturbed but looked as she did while receiving the Communion. The impression she made on me is indelible. I often see her with the eyes of memory. I trust, with God's help, to have profited by her example. Now all had come down and the sacrifice was due to begin. The noisy merriment of the spectators and their ghastly jibes add to the sufferings of the victims, insignificant from a physical point of view, but aggravated by the three successive bangs one hears and the

sight of so much blood. The executioner and his assistants climb on to the scaffold and arrange everything. The former puts on over his other clothes a blood-red overall. He places himself on the left, the west side, while his assistants stand on the other side, looking towards Vincennes. The big one is the object of much admiration and praise on the part of the cannibals, who think he looks so capable and thoughtful. When everything is ready, the old man goes up the steps with the help of the executioners. The chief headsman takes him by the left arm, the big assistant by the right and the other man by the legs. In a moment they lay him flat on his face and his head is cut off and thrown with his body into a great tumbril, where the bodies swim in blood: and so it goes on. What a horrible shambles! The Maréchale was the third to go up. They had to make an opening in the top of her dress to uncover her neck. Mme d'Ayen was the tenth. How glad she seemed at the thought that she would die before her daughter! And her daughter, too, looked happy to be following, not preceding her mother. The chief executioner tore off her bonnet. As this was fastened by a pin which he had not bothered to notice, her hair was pulled violently upwards causing her pain which was reflected on her features. When the mother had gone, the daughter replaced her. The young woman dressed all in white provided a touching spectacle. She looked much younger than she really was, as she offered herself like a gentle lamb to the slaughterers. I felt as though I were witnessing the martyrdom of one of those holy women depicted in the paintings of Correggio or Domenichino.¹

¹Correggio and Domenichino were Italian painters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, whose work often depicted sacred subjects.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In what way does the levy in mass herald a new kind of warfare?
2. Compare and contrast Maximilien Robespierre's vision of the Republic of Virtue with the ideals of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens in Section 2. What did Robespierre mean by virtue?
3. On what grounds did Robespierre justify terror?
4. Like medieval inquisitors, Robespierre regarded people with different views not as opponents but as sinners. Discuss this statement.
5. In Abbé Carrichon's description, what was the attitude of the victims? The spectators? The executioners?

The Guillotine

If you think the guillotine was a cruel form of capital punishment, think again. Dr. Joseph Ignace Guillotin proposed a machine that satisfied many needs—it was efficient, humane, and democratic. A physician and member of the National Assembly, Guillotin claimed that those executed with the device “wouldn’t even feel the slightest pain.”

Prior to the guillotine’s introduction in 1792, many French criminals had suffered through horrible punishments in public places. Although public punishments continued to attract large crowds, not all spectators were pleased with the new machine. Some witnesses felt that death by the guillotine occurred much too quickly to be enjoyed by an audience.

Once the executioner cranked the blade to the top, a mechanism released it. The sharp weighted blade fell, severing the victim’s head from his or her body.

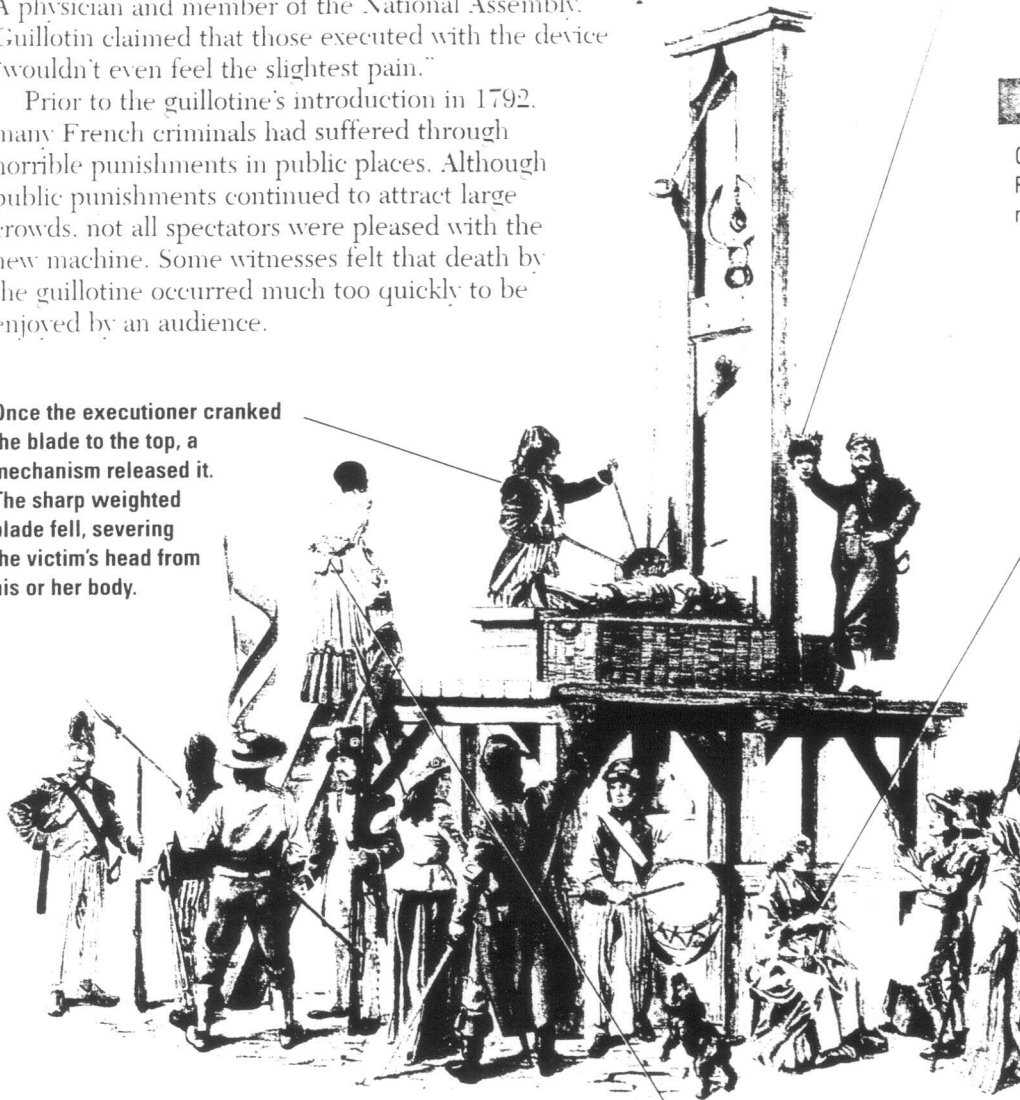
Some doctors believed that a victim’s head retained its hearing and eyesight for up to 15 minutes after the blade’s deadly blow. All remains were eventually gathered and buried in simple graves.



Criminals in 17th- and 18th-century France sometimes faced one or more of the following fatal penalties:

- Burning
- Strangulation
- Being broken on a wheel
- Hanging
- Dismemberment
- Beheading
- Being pulled apart by horses

Woman knitters, or *tricoteuses*, were regular spectators at executions and knitted stockings for soldiers as they sat near the base of the scaffold.



Connect to History

Analyzing In what ways was the guillotine an efficient means of execution?

Connect to Today

Comparing France continued to use the guillotine until the late 1970s. Compare this instrument of capital punishment with the ones used in the United States today, and present your findings in an oral report. Speculate on what the goals of capital punishment are and whether they have been achieved—in the French Revolution or in today’s world.

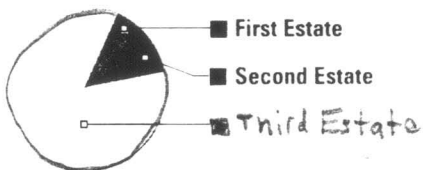


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Beheading by Class

More than 2,100 people were executed during the last 132 days of the Reign of Terror. The pie graph below displays the breakdown of beheadings by class.



Before each execution, bound victims traveled from the prison to the scaffold in horse-drawn carts during a 1½ hour procession through city streets.