AWESOME stories

THE GUILLOTINE

Photo of the original Scottish Maiden, used for executions, which we would call a “guillotine.” Introduced in 1564—during the reign of Mary, Queen of Scots—this beheading device was last used in 1718. Its blade was weighted with 75 pounds of lead. Today it is maintained at the Museum of Scotland, in Edinburgh. Photo by Kim Traynor; online via Wikimedia Commons. License: CC BY-SA 3.0

Long associated with the French Revolution’s “Reign of Terror,” the guillotine was named for Dr. Louis Guillotin. Although he did not construct it, Guillotin suggested that such a device could be used for official executions.

The guillotine was not invented in France, however. Historical evidence suggests that it was used in Ireland, as early as 1307, and may have been used before then.

Designating one device, to use for all executions, was in keeping with the revolution’s equality objective. A commoner, who previously endured torture before a slow death, would now have the same end-of-life as a nobleman. Class no longer mattered since everyone condemned to die would face the same type of trauma.

On the 25th of April, 1792 - before the "Reign of Terror" (the period between September 5, 1793 and July 28, 1794) began - Charles Henri Sanson, official executioner of the revolution, said this of the guillotine:

> *Today the machine invented for the purpose of decapitating criminals sentenced to death will be put to work for the first time. Relative to the methods of execution practised heretofore, this machine has several advantages. It is less repugnant: no man's hands will be tainted with the blood of his fellow being, and the worst of the ordeal for the condemned man will be his own fear of death, a fear more painful to him than the stroke which deprives him of life.*

Red, like the color of blood, the guillotine-in-operation produced three sounds:

> *Within seconds the three sounds that were to become the most feared in France were heard - the loud bang as the bascule swung horizontally to strike the bench; the metallic clang as the iron collar, the lunette, was swung across to pin the victim’s neck motionless, followed almost immediately by the resounding crash as the weighted blade fell, its impact in the block beneath the now-severed head shaking the entire structure, the noise reverberating around the square.* (Geoffrey Abbott, *Execution*, page 130.)

Historians have speculated that had the guillotine been less efficient, or more difficult to use, revolutionary government officials may have sought to kill fewer people. It is fair to ask: Could there really have been so many thousands of individuals who posed such grave national security threats for the new republic?

Maximilien Robespierre, the revolutionary leader who hoped to achieve a "republic of virtue," advocated the use of terror to achieve his objective. Referred to by his supporters as "The Incorruptible," Robespierre said this in a speech:

> *Terror is only justice prompt, severe and inflexible; it is then an emanation of virtue; it is less a distinct principle than a natural consequence of the general principle of democracy, applied to the most pressing wants of the country.*

Robespierre, the mastermind of the Reign of Terror, was the most powerful man in France at the time he spoke those words. As leader of the Committee of Public Safety (which instituted a national conscription program) and the executive committee of the National Convention (the new term for the National Assembly), he wanted to prevent a counter-revolution from taking hold.

But most of the thousands who were rounded up, then killed, were just ordinary people, not aristocrats. It was, as Charles Dickens notes in the opening line of his Tale of Two Cities, "the worst of times."

An individual - and his family - could find themselves walking up the execution stairs for simply expressing a critical opinion about the new government. If an informer overheard those words, such was sufficient evidence.

The 1793 Law of Suspects resulted in “Watch Committees” which were formed throughout the country. Their job was to arrest “suspected persons ... those who, either by their conduct or their relationships, by their remarks or by their writing, are shown to be partisans of tyranny and federalism and enemies of liberty."

What evidence was required for a conviction, under the law? The National Convention ordered that "if material or moral proof exists, independently of the evidence of witnesses, the latter will not be heard, unless this formality should appear necessary, either to discover accomplices or for other important reasons concerning the public interest."

In other words ... convictions - based on flimsy evidence - could be swift and final.

The document which once held such promise - The Declaration of the Rights of Man - was disregarded during the terror. "Softness to traitors will destroy us all," and other such Robespierre phrases, insured that terror in the land would last as long as its mastermind remained alive.

The guillotine’s last victim, during the Reign of Terror, was Robespierre himself. One of its first, during that time frame, was the Queen of France.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
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Media Stream

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Charles Henri Sanson

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Maximilien Robespierre

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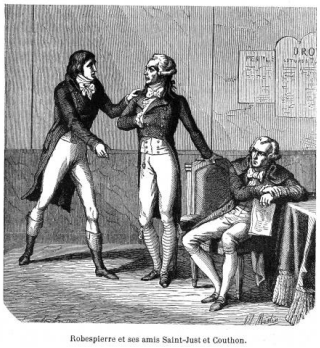

Robespierre - Mastermind of the Reign of Terror

Image of 18th-century illustration depicting Robespierre, Saint-Just and Couthon. Online via Wikimedia Commons.
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Robespierre - Beginnings of the Reign of Terror

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Robespierre - Terrorist Leader During the French Revolution

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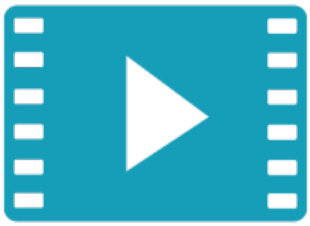

Robespierre - Death by Guillotine

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