**The French Guillotine**

**Directions:** Read the following primary documents about the Guillotine used during the French Revolution. Consider and answer the following questions to help guide your connects to the importance of the guillotine and the Reign of Terror. The Guillotine is more than a beheading tool, but rather than a political tool.

**Background**

Long associated with the French Revolution’s “Reign of Terror,” the [guillotine](https://www.awesomestories.com/assets/guillotine) was named for [Dr. Louis Guillotin](https://www.awesomestories.com/assets/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.

Primary Source #1: *April 25th, 1792. Charles Henri Sanson, official revolution executioner.*

“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.”

1. Based on this quote, what does the guillotine offer to quick and effective executions?
2. How should the victim feel about the guillotine? Why?
3. Based on the relationship described above, what makes the guillotine the perfect tool for the Reign of Terror?

Primary Source #2: *Execution.* Geoffrey Abbot.

“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.”

1. During the Reign of Terror, watching a beheading was commonplace and almost popular, why would citizens be okay with such a sight described above?
2. This quote describes a quick process, in your opinion, does this make the guillotine a more ethical weapon? Why or why not?

Source #3: Modern World History: Patterns of Interaction. Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell (2006), pp. 226-227.

**The Terror Grips France**

Foreign armies were not the only enemies of the French Republic. The Jacobins had thousands of enemies within France itself. These included peasants who were horrified by the king’s execution, priests who would not accept government control, and rival leaders who were stirring up rebellion in the provinces. How to contain and control these enemies became a central issue.

**Robespierre Assumes Control**

In the early months of 1793, one Jacobin leader, Maximilian Robespierre, slowly gained power. Robespierre and his supporters set out to build a “republic of virtue” by wiping out every trace of France’s past. Firm believers in reason, they changed the calendar, dividing the year into 12 months of 30 days and renaming each month. This calendar had no Sundays because the radicals considered religion old-fashioned and dangerous. They even closed all churches in Paris, and cities and towns all over France soon did the same. In July 1793, Robespierre became leader of the Committee of Public Safety. For the next year, Robespierre governed France virtually as a dictator, and the period of his rule became known as the Reign of Terror. The Committee of Public Safety’s chief task was to protect the Revolution from its enemies. Under Robespierre’s leadership, the committee often had these “enemies” tried in the morning and guillotined in the afternoon. Robespierre justified his use of terror by suggesting that it helped French citizens to remain true to the ideals of the Revolution. Thousands of unknown people were also sent to their death, often on the flimsiest of charges. For example, an 18-year-old youth was sentenced to die for cutting down a tree that had been planted as a symbol of liberty. Perhaps as many as 40,000 were executed during the Terror. About 85 percent were peasants or members of the urban poor or middle class—for whose benefit the Revolution had been launched.

**Document Questions:**

1. According to the documents, why did the Jacobins have so many enemies?

2. Robespierre and his supporters created a new calendar. Why would they want to wipe out “every trace of France’s past?”

3. According to the documents, Robespierre believed terror helped French citizens remain “true to the ideals of the Revolution.” What were the ideals of the French Revolution? (Use what you already know about the French Revolution to answer this question).

Primary Source Documents

**Document A:** Excerpt from *Decree Against Profiteers*, passed July 1793

In July 1793, faced with an angry and hungry population, the leaders of the Committee of Public Safety passed the “Decree Against Profiteers.” The law accused “profiteers” in the countryside of hoarding or monopolizing grain in order to raise the price of bread.

26 July 1793

1. Monopoly is a capital crime.

2. Those who keep out of circulation essential merchandise or commodities without offering them for sale daily and publicly are declared guilty of monopoly

3. The essential commodities and merchandise are: bread, meat, wine, grain, flour, vegetables, fruit, butter, vinegar, cider, brandy, charcoal, tallow, wood, oil, soda, soap, salt, [etc.]

4. Those who have any of these commodities shall be required to declare them and sell them .

5. One week from today, those who have not declared their goods shall be considered monopolists, and, as such, punished with death; their property shall be confiscated, and their commodities or merchandise shall be placed on sale.

6. Those convicted of making false declarations likewise shall be punished with death. Public officials who protect monopolists shall also be punished with death.

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| Vocabulary:  Capital: punishable by death Monopoly: total control over something  Decree: an official order Municipality: local government  Commodities: things that can be bought and sold |

**Document A: Decree Against Profiteers Questions**

1. Why did the Committee of Public Safety pass the Decree Against Profiteers?

2. Why did the Committee of Public Safety consider monopoly to be such a serious crime?

3.What was the punishment for those who did not comply with this law?

**Document B:** Excerpt from Law of Suspects, passed September 1793.

By September 1793, the leaders of the Committee of Public Safety faced growing counter-revolutionary uprisings and mounting fear of foreign invasion. They responded by passing the Law of Suspects, which established revolutionary courts to try anyone suspected of treason against the revolution.

1 Immediately after the publication of the present decree, all suspected persons within the territory of the Republic and still at liberty shall be placed in custody.

2. The following are deemed suspected persons:

1st, those who, by their conduct, associations, talk, or writings have shown themselves to be enemies of liberty

2nd, those who are unable to justify their means of existence and the performance of their civic duties

3rd, those to whom certificates of patriotism have been refused

4th, public officials suspended or dismissed from their positions by the National Convention or by its commissioners and not reinstated

5th, those former nobles, husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, sons or daughters, brothers or sisters of émigrés, who have not steadily demonstrated their devotion to the Revolution Vocabulary certificates of patriotism: proof of patriotism required to serve in military émigrés: people who leave their own country to settle in another, usually for political reasons Source: Excerpt from Law of Suspects, passed September 1793.

**Document B: Law of Suspects Questions**

1. What was the goal of the Law of suspects?

2. List two examples of people who would have been considered suspects. Explain why the Committee of Public Safety would have considered them suspects.

3. What might the leaders of the Committee of Public Safety have said to justify this law?

**Final Question!**

Did the Guillotine alone make the Reign of Terror successful? Why or why not?

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