

# La Veuve:

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## The Guillotine and Its Role During the French Revolution

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### The Guillotine and Its Role During the French Revolution

During the late eighteenth century, France was rife with new and more enlightened ideas. The people of France no longer were willing to accept the ways of the *ancien regime*; they believed that it was time to enter the age of enlightenment. The Third Estate, France's lower class, was brimming with feelings of malcontent and an ever growing willingness to act upon their desire for change. They were no longer willing to deal with the inequality imposed upon them due to the circumstances of their birth. These new attitudes gave rise to a new generation of intellectuals focused on providing the masses with the necessities of an enlightened society and eliminating the antiquated ways of the *ancien regime*. The revolution officially began 14 July 1789 with the storming of the Bastille, but revolutionary thought began many years before this. It began as a hope for a better France, a France based on *libertie, egalitie, and fraternitie*. It was with these most honorable and enlightened ideas in mind that Dr. Guillotin created his six articles and his idea for a humanitarian form of execution, the guillotine. This machine crafted from the most modern of technologies and born from truly humanitarian intentions was aimed at ending the barbarous torture that was prevalent throughout France. With its creation Dr. Guillotin hoped to end the cruelty and bring about equality in death. His viewpoint was shared and even furthered by many of his contemporaries such as Jean-Paul Marat and Maximilien Robespierre who at one point were in favor of abolishing capital punishment altogether. Sadly these humanitarian beliefs would not last for many; they were warped by the revolutionary fervor and brought the most radical of revolutionaries to power. With these twisted ideals, this humanitarian machine would become a weapon, a tool for revolutionaries such as Robespierre, to spread fear and to eliminate the enemies of their revolution. Just as the revolution was in

response to the abuses of the *ancien regime* and King Louis XVI, the people of France would again revolt against Robespierre and the revolutionary tribunals that brought about the Reign of Terror and brutalized the people of France. The fall of Robespierre marked the end of the Terror; it had come full circle, the guillotine was turned against those who had so heinously abused its power. The events of the revolution and moreover the Reign of Terror had forever tainted the humanitarian idea from which the machine came. The idea that in death all men should be afforded a swift and painless transition handed out equally regardless of their rank or position in society. Instead, the guillotine will forever be remembered for the exorbitant number of lives taken in the name of a cause that had strayed from its original path of *libertie, egalitie, fraternitie*.

### **Birth of the Guillotine**

Pre-revolutionary France was a country in turmoil, a country struggling for change. This desire for change is never more visible than it was concerning capital punishment. Capital punishment varied for both crime and social class. The aristocracy was granted the most “merciful” of deaths; they were beheaded by axe or broadsword. However, this death rarely turned out to be merciful. It was often a long drawn out process resulting in a need for repeated hacking on the condemned’s neck before the head was successfully removed. This proved torturous for the condemned, the executioner and the spectators. The lower classes were hanged at the gallows, which was essentially a slow strangulation since the neck breaking techniques were yet to be developed. Murderers, highwaymen and bandits were broken on the wheel, while religious heretics were burned alive. The most brutal of punishments was reserved for regicides, persons convicted of attacking the King’s majesty, who were put to the question, a brutal form of torture that often lasted for days or even weeks in order to determine whether the criminal had

acted alone. The criminal was then hanged till near death, and as a final blow were then drawn and quartered (Opie 15). To be drawn and quartered was a gruesome ritual that had no place in an “enlightened” society. It involved strapping a man’s arms and legs to four separate horses then driving the horses forward to forcibly remove, the still living, man’s limbs. In 1757 Robert Francois Damiens made an unsuccessful attempt on the life of Louis XV with a letter opener. The attack resulted in an insignificant scratch on the King’s arm (Fife 29). Despite the insignificance of the injury, Damiens was put to the question for a ghastly eight weeks to determine whether he had acted alone (Opie 16). The question was essentially torture doled out to obtain information from the condemned. After enduring this excessive punishment during which his right hand, the one that held the dagger, was burned and flesh was ripped from his body with hot pincers. After enduring this unimaginable torture, Damiens was strapped to four horses to be quartered. This lasted for over an hour without success. It was not until the executioner severed his tendons and sinew that the horses could dismember him. Astonishingly, and quite unfortunately, Damiens did not die until his last limb was ripped from his body (Fife 30). This moment proved to be a turning point for France. The crowds no longer reveled in this barbaric ritual. This change in attitude helped facilitate France’s, so called, change toward enlightenment. Bringing rise to many individuals that would soon mold France to their vision.

In 1777 Jean-Paul Marat, who would later be known for his radical paper “The People’s Journal,” took part in a competition held by the Society of Citizens of Neuchâtel. In his submission, he stated that capital punishment should be rare and when necessary should never be cruel, writing “the machinery of death should instill fear but the death should be an easy one” (Fife 53). His views were later echoed by Maximilien Robespierre, when, in 1783 he entered a similar competition at the University of Metz. He argued that the shame caused by being broken

on the wheel and hanged was extended to the culprit's family as well; to alleviate this he suggested extending the blade of the headsman to all. Stating that, since it was taken as a mark of nobility the families of the criminals would no longer suffer this degradation (Fife 54). France, at this time, was full of new more enlightened views, and the large personalities necessary to move society in that direction. Much of the educated population of France's Third Estate were formulating the same views and working towards them. It was at this time that Dr. Joseph Ignace Guillotin began to formulate his plan for a more humane penal system in France.

The circumstances of Dr. Guillotin's birth are a well-known story, the validity of which cannot be determined. It is said that late in the stages of pregnancy, his mother was an unfortunate witness to a criminal being broken on the wheel. This incident caused her to go into labor and Guillotin was born, premature, the following day, 28 May 1738, in Saintes, forever sealing his fate (Opie 17). True or not, this is an ominous story giving motivation to Guillotin's goals. In 1763 he left the Jesuit order directing his focus now on medicine and received his doctorate in 1770 (Arasse 8). In 1788, Guillotin gained notoriety by putting before the King the *Pétition des Six-Corps des Marchands de Paris*, the first ever petition to directly address the King. The *Pétition* made four demands; the number of representatives from the Third Estate should be at least equal to the total number of representatives of the other two estates; votes were to be counted by heads; the deputies of the Third Estate should be chosen from this Order; the representatives of the Third Estate will be in proportion to the franchise (Soubiran 76). This bold act led to Guillotin's summons to the *Parlement de Paris*, the judicial body of Paris. As he fearfully entered the *Parlement* Guillotin was welcomed, as a friend would be, by the members, and though they passed judgment on the method of distribution they verbally approved of the *Pétition's* message. To Guillotin, and all of the Third Estate, this was victory (Soubiran 78).

Following his success, he also aided in drafting the *Cahiers de Doleances*, or list of grievances (Arasse 9). These two major events led to his election as a deputy of the Third Estate in 1789 (Arasse 8). It is at this point that Guillotin becomes a central figure for change.

On 10 October 1789 Dr. Guillotin made a proposal, with the utmost of humanitarian intentions, and consisting of six articles, to the Constituent Assembly suggesting a reform for the penal system of the *ancient regime* (Arasse 11). However, the timing was quite inopportune, the assembly was still dealing with the riots of October 6<sup>th</sup> and the proposal was passed over. Guillotin did not waver and on 1 December 1789 he again presented his articles:

Article 1. Crimes of the same kind shall be punished by the same kinds of punishment, whatever the rank or estate of the criminal.

Article 2. Offenses and crimes are personal, and no stain shall attach to the family from the criminal's execution or loss of civil rights. The members of the family are in no way dishonored and remain, without exception, eligible for all kinds of profession, employment and civic dignity.

Article 3. Under no circumstances whatever may order be made of the confiscation of the goods of a condemned man.

Article 4. The body of the executed man shall be returned to the family, should the family so request. Normal burial shall in all cases be permitted and the register shall not specify the circumstances of the death.

Article 5. No one may reproach a citizen with the execution or loss of civil rights incurred by a relative. Should anyone dare to do so, he shall be reprimanded by a judge.

Article 6. The method of punishment shall be the same for all persons on whom the law shall pronounce a sentence of death, whatever the crime of which they are guilty. The criminal shall be decapitated. Decapitation is to be effected by a simple mechanism.

(Arasse 11)

Guillotin's exact words when presenting his articles have been lost, but a few of his more enthusiastic phrases were jotted down by the assembly secretary, in particular one describing the operation of the proposed device, "It falls like thunder; the head flies off; blood spurts; and the man is no more!" This statement brought much laughter from the assembly (Megivern). In spite of the assembly's reaction the first article of Guillotin's proposal was passed immediately and articles 2, 3 and 4 were passed on 21 January 1790 (Arasse 13). It would be nearly two more years before the assembly would debate Guillotin's sixth article. On 3 June 1791 Guillotin's sixth and final article was approved without anymore debate (Opie 23). Despite the passing of this most progressive article, it would not become law until 20 March 1792 (Opie 24). This delay was indicative of the immense transformation required of long standing opinions on capital punishment (Arasse 16). To further delay matters, there was also a movement to enter the age of enlightenment and abolish capital punishment altogether, and on 30 May 1791 it was debated in the assembly. This debate was highlighted by Robespierre's eloquent speech in favor of abolition; the assembly was unmoved proving that France was still unready to abandon capital punishment (Arasse 20).

With the whole of France buried in bureaucratic mayhem, the evolution of the guillotine started as an unnecessarily slow process. In March of 1792 Charles Henri Sanson, executioner of Paris, submitted a memorandum outlining the need for a decapitating instrument. The memo stated that since he only owned two swords and the act of severing ones head rendered a sword dull and useless that accidents would be frequent henceforth making the punishment cruel and inhumane (Gerould 14). In order to abide by the spirit of the new law and to achieve the assembly's desire for equality, Sanson claimed that the new device would be entirely necessary (Opie 30). He also included his concern that individuals of the lower classes would not possess the stoicism and fortitude necessary to endure this form of execution making his job increasingly difficult (Fife 54). In early March 1792, the assembly formed a committee to determine the viability of Guillotin's decapitating machine. Dr. Antoine Louis, permanent secretary of the Academy of Surgery, was named chairman, and without delay, on 7 March 1792, released the Louis Report. Contained in this report was Dr. Louis' confirmation that the proposed machine would, "perform the act in an instant according to the letter and spirit of the law." He also provided a description of an already known device that would be the starting point for his design, the Halifax gibbet (Gerould 15).

Contrary to popular belief, the guillotine was not the first machine of its kind, decapitating machines had been used throughout Europe since times of antiquity. England used the Halifax gibbet, a crude machine that used an axe mounted to a large block of wood to sever the head of its victims (Fife 52). This was achieved more through a brutish chopping action rather than the surgical slicing action used by the guillotine. Italy used the mannaia, Germany used a machine called the planke, and Scotland used the maiden until 1710 (Gerould 16). Unknown to both, Dr. Louis and Dr. Guillotin, France also used a machine similar to the mannaia, during the



renaissance, and in 1632 it was used to execute Henri II de Montmorency for inciting a revolt against Richelieu (Gerould 22). The new and “modern” guillotine bore a striking resemblance to these previous machines yet it was born from a far more “humanitarian” idea, equality, and though it was based on these earlier devices, the guillotine was developed with distinct design differences. First, the guillotine’s blade was no longer flat, it was convex, which resulted in a cutting action as opposed to the chopping action used by those machines of the past, and secondly, it possessed a crescent shaped device, the lunette, that allowed the executioner to secure the condemned’s head between the uprights (Gerould 23).

On 20 March 1792, the National Assembly passed an emergency decree suspending all executions until the “simple device” was ready and the punishment could be carried out according to the new law; five days later Louis XVI made a royal decree stating that the new law pertaining to the death penalty and its’ method should be held as the law of the realm (Soubiran 131). The emergency decree put new found urgency into the development of the guillotine. A design was rapidly produced by Dr. Louis and then forwarded to M. Guedon, the carpenter who built the scaffolds currently in use. On 23 March 1792 Roederer, *procureur general* of Paris, wrote to Clavière, minister of public taxes, requesting him to do what was necessary to ensure the completion of the machine (Soubiran 133). Clavière replied requesting an estimate; Roederer immediately forwarded M. Guedon’s estimate. This estimate was grossly overpriced totaling an astronomical 5,660 livres (Soubiran 134). Knowing full well it was overpriced Guedon attached a note claiming that the costs were high due to it being the first machine constructed and that subsequent models would be markedly less. He also claimed that, due to the nature of the machine, it was difficult to find men willing to do work they found offensive. Due to the scandalous nature of the estimate, Roederer recommended finding another carpenter to build the

machine, and on April 9<sup>th</sup> Clavière acknowledged receipt of estimate and agreed with Roederer (Soubiran 136). The following day Tobias Schmidt, a German harpsichord maker, submitted an estimate totaling 960 livres, it was immediately accepted. This came none too soon as the following day Roederer received a letter from Judge Moreau imploring him to expedite the building of the guillotine stating that a condemned prisoner has been awaiting execution for nearly two months and that, “ every moment by which his wretched existence is prolonged must be another death to him” (Arasse 22). This viewpoint demonstrates the tremendous change of attitude experienced in France, no longer was it acceptable to submit people to the unnecessary torture that previously was so widely accepted. The guillotine was a reprieve from torture.

The first working machine was completed within a couple days of receiving Schmidt’s estimate and on 17 April 1792 it would be tested for the first time (Soubiran 138). The tests took place at the Bicêtre Hospital and were overseen by three doctors, Dr. Louis, Dr. Guillotin and Dr. Michel Cullerier, the director of the hospital. Dr. Cullerier had offered to donate fresh corpses to test the machine. The first tests did not go as well as had been anticipated. Three corpses had been acquired and while the first two heads were severed without error the final body was that of a rather large man and the machine failed to completely sever its’ head (Soubiran 140). It was determined that this was caused by the shape of the blade it did not provide the slicing action necessary to dispatch a neck of this size. This event has given rise to a popular story claiming that the King himself is responsible for recommending the oblique shape of the blade and can be found in Alexandre Dumas’ The Tragedies of 1793. The ironic story claims that after the failed test, Louis XVI, known for his skills as a locksmith, approached Dr. Guillotin, Dr. Louis and Charles-Henri Sanson as they were discussing how to correct the machines failure. Dr. Louis drew a diagram of the machine for the King; upon studying it the King said, “...the fault lies

there, instead of being shaped like a crescent, the blade should be triangular in form and cut obliquely like a saw” (Opie 46). Clément-Henri Sanson, grandson of Charles-Henri Sanson and last of the Sanson dynasty of executioners, told a similar tale he recalled from his grand-fathers notes. The story is very much like that of Dumas claiming that upon examination the King suggested making the blade a triangular shape stating, “such a blade would therefore be able to accommodate all necks” (Opie 47). Regardless of who made the design change Dr. Guillotin commissioned a new blade for the machine and on its’ second test at Bicêtre hospital it was unveiled with an oblique blade; this time the test went off without a hitch (Soubiran 140). One week after the tests at Bicêtre Hospital the guillotine, at this time the *louison*, received its’ first victim Nicholas Jacques Pelletier, and armed robber; he beat a man with a cudgel and then robbed him of 800 livres (Fife 50).

The device dreamt up by Guillotin, designed by Dr. Louis and built by Tobias Schmidt was complete unfortunately for some this would be a bittersweet victory. After the completion of the second test, Dr. Guillotin’s involvement came to a halt he would spend the rest of his life trying to distance his self from the machine that would bear his name. Dr. Guillotin was never present at an execution and vehemently protested the use of his name for the machine, and for awhile it seemed he would get his wish (Soubiran 141). For the first execution, the machine had the name *Petit Louison* or *Louisette* to honor Dr. Louis, the machine’s inventor. Dr. Louis took much offense to these names even to the point of insisting he took no part in the design and development of the machine that he had only suggested the shape of the blade. Fortunately for Dr. Louis, and unfortunately for Dr. Guillotin, the press significantly preferred calling the machine the guillotine (Opie 47). In contrast to the behavior of both Dr. Guillotin and Dr. Louis, Tobias Schmidt had no compunction with his name being attached to the machine his attitude

was quite the opposite. In fact, seeing a large sum of money to be had, he applied to obtain a patent for the machine and at the same time submitted a bid to be the sole supplier of guillotines to the French provinces (Arasse 24). Schmidt did receive the contract to build guillotines for the provinces at a cost of 824 livres per machine. Despite receiving the contract the patent was refused and on 24 July 1792 the Minister of the Interior sent him a reply stating, “Humanity is repelled by the idea of granting a patent for an invention of this kind. We have not sunk to such a barbarous level.” This letter exhibits the extreme moral change in France; a machine born from enlightened humanitarian intentions has so quickly become “barbarous” in the eyes of the people (Arasse 25). This new view could be witnessed in the actions of the machine’s namesake, Dr. Guillotin. After the successful test of the machine he prepared suicide pills of his own concoction for all of his friends so they would not have to face the guillotine (Arasse 23).

### **The Revolution Begins**

The French revolution was a revolution against inequality and famine; a movement to put an end to the monarchy’s inability to provide for its people and to bring about a new order not rooted in the antiquated ways of the *ancien regime* (Gerould 27). This movement was bred in the neighborhoods and social gatherings of two major political clubs, the Cordeliers and the Society of Friends of the Revolution, commonly known as the Jacobins. The membership of these two clubs read like a who’s who of revolutionary figures, men educated amongst the nobility of French society and then forced into lesser positions due to the outdated system of the *ancien regime*, this gathering of enlightened and disenfranchised men would be the beginning of the revolution. This was a foreshadowed outcome; an outcome that Voltaire warned would come when he wrote, “all is lost once the people entangles itself in reasoning,” meaning that once allowed the freedom to become educated people would no longer stand for the ways of a society

based on the circumstances of one's birth. This sentiment was later validated by Georges Jacques Danton when he was quoted as saying, "the old regime made a crucial error. I was educated by it as an exhibitioner at the Collège du Plessis. I studied there with great nobles who lived with me on equal terms. My studies over, I was left high and dry my former school fellows turned their backs on me. The revolution came: I and all those like me threw ourselves into it. The old regime drove us to it by giving us a good education without opening any opportunity for our talents" (Fife 13). Danton was born in 1759 at Arcis-sur-Aube in the Champagne region. He was a man of high energy and superior intelligence, an excellent orator and an astute lawyer. After attaining entry to the law courts Danton would become a prominent member of the Cordeliers, a club Camille Desmoulins, a member and revolutionary journalist, called the "true heart of the revolution." The club was located on the left bank in the Cordeliers district and had many prominent members such as: Fabre d'Eglantine, author of the revolutionary calendar (Fife 14), Jacques-René Hebert, author of *Pere Duchesne* which played a prominent role in organizing the anti-monarchist demonstration of 20 June 1792 (Slavin 13), Jean-Paul Marat, known as "the people's friend" and the author of the "The Peoples Journal," and the previously named Danton and Desmoulins, who were close personal friends. Across the river resided the Society of Friends of the Revolution, or as they were more commonly known, the Jacobins. The Jacobins club was housed closer to the center of French government so accordingly they consisted of a more prestigious membership. Notable members of the Jacobins included such people as Dr. Guillotin, members of the Cordeliers, Danton and Marat (Fife 14), and later Napoleon would become a Jacobin, but the most powerful and soon to be infamous was Maximilien Robespierre, a lawyer from Arras (Kuehnelt-Leddihn 39). When he was only six, his mother died during childbirth, and shortly following her funeral, he and his siblings were abandoned by his father.

Robespierre was then sent to live with his maternal grandfather, who promptly shipped him off to an Oratorian school where he was taught that god was the center of all creation and that he did not exist to serve man. At the age of eleven, he enrolled in Louis-le-Grand College in Paris where such notables as Voltaire and the Marquis de Sade had attended. During his years there, he was surrounded by likeminded individuals who would also play pivotal roles in the revolution such as Camille Desmoulins and Lebrun, who would later become the minister of war (Fife 14-16).

The revolution that engulfed France began as ideals discussed within these two powerful political clubs. They would form a vision of a better France based on noble ideas of the most egalitarian and humanitarian intentions. *Libertie, egalitie, fraternitie* would be their war cry and for a short while they would hold to their virtuous path, but early in the revolution their motives would go through a moral breakdown. The beginning of this breakdown occurred moments after the fall of the Bastille, the event that officially marks the beginning of the French revolution. Upon the fall of the Bastille De Launay, the commander of the Bastille, in return for their surrender, asked that he and his garrison of Swiss Guard be given safe conduct. The leaders of the mob conceded this condition but upon gaining entrance they withdrew this promise and slaughtered all those that had defended the fortress. The mob had grown brutally cruel and after the killing of De Launay his head was removed, with a considerable amount of difficulty, by a butcher's assistant and then paraded through the streets of Paris (Kuehnelt-Leddihn 39). This rapid decline in intentions would breed an environment that with the development of the guillotine would prove disastrous for the people of France. By the time the guillotine would come to fruition the revolutionaries had already become mired within the depths of corruption and with this new machine they would commit countless atrocities. The guillotine was used for

the first time on 25 April 1792 in the Place de Greve, where all common law offenders would be executed until December 1792, and would again shed blood only three days later, this time it would take three victims, soldiers convicted of murdering a street vendor. The guillotine would not see its first political victim until 21 August 1792 in the Place du Carousel, which would become the site for all political offenders through December 1792; the victim was Louis-David Collenot d'Angremont, administrator of the National Guard (Opie 54,197). During the early days of the guillotine, the crowds gathering to witness justice handed out by the new device often left feeling disappointed as if they had been cheated out of something that rightfully belonged to them (Fife 56). No longer would they be witness to the long drawn out ritual they were accustomed to the guillotine was to swift in its actions it performed just as Dr. Guillotin had said it would, "the mechanism falls like thunder, the head flies, the blood spurts...the man is no more" (Soubiran 117). It all happened so fast that many of the crowd, unaccustomed to the operation of the machine, had looked away momentarily or were engaged in idle chatter missing the show altogether. Due to the crowd's initial disapproval of the swiftness with which the execution was carried out, they were heard chanting, "give me back my wooden gibbet, give me back my gallows," after the inaugural use of the guillotine. The whole spectacle was lessened by the presence of the guillotine even the great Sanson, who had played such a prominent role in the theater of public execution now held only a bit part. Camille Desmoulins being witness to this drastic change wrote that Sanson had been transformed from a master craftsman into, "a mere agent of public works...a simple representative of the Executive" (Fife 57). It would not take long however for the crowd to grow enamored with the guillotine and amazed by the massive numbers it could dispatch with mechanical precision.

With their new found taste for the new method of execution, there began a large public outcry for justice and a desire to finally rid themselves of the ways of the *ancien regime* allowed the revolutionaries to systematically rid themselves of all opposition. On 10 August 1792, a mob of Marat's followers or *sansculottes*, which literally means "without culottes" which was the typical dress of French nobility, marched on the Tuilleries, where the royal family had been confined, and forcibly removed them; the monarchy was no more (Fife 61). The royal family was taken to the temple prison, where the King was separated from his family, and all members were put under armed guard (Opie 70). With the monarchy defeated, the members of the National Committee began waging war on all remaining royalists and within a week nearly one thousand people, the majority of which were priests and clergy, were arrested and charged with crimes against the revolution. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of August, Danton, who had recently been appointed minister of Justice, authorized house to house searches to root out traitors to the revolution he rationalized this with the statement, "when the *patrie* is in danger, everything belongs to the *patrie*." These new tactics were welcomed by most members of the Paris Commune and would soon collect nearly three thousand suspects that consisted mostly of aristocrats, and priests. The committee began running out of space to confine so many and began taking housing belonging to the churches; when this newly acquired housing began to grow short of their needs Marat, a new member of the Committee of Surveillance, which was in charge of overseeing all matters pertaining to counterrevolutionaries, suggested, "burn them to the ground, a purging fire." This suggestion was rejected only for fear of spreading fire throughout Paris. The people of Paris became frustrated with the inability of the guillotine and executioner to dispatch of these criminals fast enough, little would they know that soon enough the Reign of Terror would bring more death than they could handle. A woman lemonade seller was quoted as saying, "there's a



lot of talk about chopping off heads, but not enough blood is flowing” (Fife 64-67). Due to these feelings held by the masses, on 2 September a mob was formed to attack the prisons and slaughter the prisoners. The September massacres were followed by the defeat of the Prussians, who had attempted to invade France to save the now imprisoned royal family, sealing the fate of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette (Opie 70).

Within the National Assembly a division had been formed between the two major parties the Jacobins, or mountains as they were nicknamed, and the Girondins, known as the plains. The parties received their nicknames based on the seating arrangements in the hall of Convention (Opie 64). This division would never be more apparent than it was regarding the conviction of the King. Many of the Jacobins were in favor of foregoing a criminal trial altogether with the most predominant of these being Maximilien Robespierre and a newcomer Saint-Just, who was a devoted follower of Robespierre. On 13 November, after the discovery of documents incriminating the King, Saint-Just made his first speech before the convention:

“The whole object of the committee investigating the conduct of the King was to persuade you that he should be judged as a common citizen. I tell you that he ought to be judged as an enemy, that in fact we are not here to judge him at all but to oppose him and that the forms of this process are not to be found in civil law but in the law of nations...Judge a King as a citizen? The very idea. Judgment means to apply the law. Law requires a common ground of justice. And what common ground of justice lies between humanity and kings? What do the French people have in common with Louis that we should show him any consideration after his treachery? To reign is per se to be guilty. Tyranny is the crime and how can a king be innocent of that?” (Fife 88)

Saint-Just's sentiments were echoed by Robespierre in a 3 December session of the Convention stating, "...if Louis can still be put on trial, he can be acquitted...and if Louis is acquitted, if he can be presumed innocent, what becomes of the Revolution?" (Fife 90-91) The impassioned speeches of these two men demonstrated the ruthlessness with which they would soon call upon during the Reign of Terror. They saw no room for moderation and believed that no action was too extreme when it came to protecting the revolution. However, their extreme views were not shared by all and the Convention decided that to condemn the King without trial would go too far, so on 26 December Louis' case was pleaded by Girondin Raymond de Sèze, to no avail (Fife 91). This would not only mark the end of the King but it would signal the last days of the Girondin's. The Republic had no place for moderates and Robespierre would do everything possible to ensure this. The King was executed 21 January 1793 in the Place de la Revolution; he would meet his death without remorse or recrimination with all the dignity expected from a King (Opie 70). The tale of his last moments on Earth has been told in many different versions the details wholly dependent upon the affiliations of the storyteller. The republican versions, which were printed in many of the papers in Paris, claim that with his last words the King announced that with his death the people of France would incur many disasters; he was quoted as saying, "I am doomed, I die innocent. I pardon my enemies my death, but they shall be punished for in" (Arasse 67). This was done to further vilify him in the hopes of ensuring the support of the people (Arasse 66). Becoming angered by this Sanson, who normally plays a neutral role, sent a letter that appeared in *Le Thermomètre du Jour* and showed admiration and sympathy for the dead king claiming that he died with a dignity, derived from his strong religious beliefs, that few possessed (Arasse 58). This claim is supported by Louis XVI's confessor, Abbé Edgeworth. In his memoirs the Abbé states that upon arriving at the foot of the scaffold the king ready

himself for the guillotine not allowing the executioner's assistants to touch him and after some defiance allowed them to bind them. After mounting the stairs, he then proceeded to the front of the platform and declared before the crowd, "I die innocent of all the crimes laid to my charge; I pardon those who have occasioned my death; and I pray to God, that the blood you are now going to shed may never be visited on France," and with these final words the King was dragged to the guillotine and laid beneath its blade (Edgeworth 83-85). The scene following the execution of Louis XVI was of jubilation the streets were full of joyous people chanting "*Vive La Republique!*" Man and women alike were seen dipping their handkerchiefs in his freshly spilled blood and fighting over pieces of his clothing and hair. It would not be until October 1793 that the Queen, Marie Antoinette would join her husband.

### **The Terror**

The Louis XVI was dead and with his death the flood gates had been thrown open. His death gave Robespierre and his compatriots the right to use the guillotine as a tool to exact their political agenda. The Terror would officially begin on 29 March 1793 coinciding with the formation of the Committee of General Security which would be followed 6 April when a second committee was formed, the Committee of Public Safety (O'Kane 59). The second of the two would prove to be more famous, or should I say infamous, due to its members, most notable of which were Georges Danton, the first committee president, and Maximilien Robespierre, who would turn the committee into the executive power within the revolutionary government (Fife 143). These two committees would be aided by the, also newly formed, revolutionary tribunals that, originally formed in Paris, spread throughout France. The Tribunal was set up with the specific task of trying counter-revolutionaries and initially consisted of five judges and twelve jury members. With the massive numbers of people tried, it became necessary to speed up this

process, and in order to accomplish this, trials were soon limited to a three day limit and in July of 1794 the defense was no longer allowed a lawyer or witnesses essentially making the trial nothing more than an obligatory ritual on the accused's path to death (O'Kane 60). With each month these groups would grow more and more blinded by the distrust and fear that they bred literally causing the streets of France to run red. With the mass guillotining that was all too typical of the Tribunal such amounts of blood would be spilled that it became a concern for public health (Opie 85-86). Hoping to put an end to this bloodshed, on 11 July 1793 the ill fated Charlotte Corday gained an audience with "The People's Friend," Jean-Paul Marat, by claiming to have important information for Marat's ears only. After gaining entrance, Corday would pull a knife from beneath her bodice and with it mortally wound Marat before she could be subdued by his supporters. On the eve of her trial, Corday wrote to her father maintaining the belief, "I have avenged many innocent victims and prevented many other disasters. One day, when the people have their eyes opened, they will rejoice at being delivered from a tyrant." She maintained this position through her trial openly admitting she came to Paris with the intent to kill Marat, in the hopes of saving thousands more (Fife 8-9). Sadly,, Corday would die beneath the guillotine not as a martyr for the people but as an enemy of the people and their righteous revolution. The massive amounts of death handed out by the leaders of the revolution would continue for some time to come.

Marie Antoinette was executed 16 October 1793 in the Place de la Revolution after spending the last two months separated from her children and confined to a small dark cell in the Conciergerie, which had become a prisoner's final home before meeting with the guillotine. On the day of her death she was not afforded a closed carriage, as her husband the King had been, instead she was loaded into a tumbrel, an open cart used to transport the condemned to the

guillotine, forcing her to endure the cruel abuse of the mob, which harbored an intense hatred for the Queen. According to the accounts of the executioner, Henri Sanson, save a brief moment in which her composure faltered causing her to grow physically ill, she met her death with all the stoicism and grace that her position required. In fact, it would become typical of all victims of the Terror to meet their deaths with great dignity feeling just in their actions (Opie 77-78). This would not be the case with the favorite of Louis XV, Madame Du Barry, she had to be dragged from her cell and loaded into the tumbrel all the while kicking and screaming. Upon arriving at the scaffold, she begged for a reprieve from one and all pleading her innocence. She had to be dragged up the steps and forced upon the *bascule*, and as the blade fell a silence swept through the mob; the actions of Madame Du Barry had forced the crowd to feel such pity that many had called out for her to be spared from death (Opie 89-90). Many historians have speculated that had more victims acted this way, the Terror would not been able to grip France with the intensity that it had, thus saving thousands of lives (Gerould 30).

The official death toll reached, by some estimates, as high as 40,000 people many of which died while in prison from one of the many diseases that ran rampant throughout all of the prisons of Paris. Officially 17,000 victims fell to the guillotine, of which only approximately 800 were members of the aristocracy or nobility of the *ancien regime*, the remainder being derived from the same poor ranks that the leaders of the Terror had once been a part of (O'Kane 63). During the height of the Terror Robespierre would become gripped with paranoia and an even more resolute opinion on how the revolution should play out, causing a division between himself and much of his own party, the Jacobins. On 30 March 1794 Robespierre called an emergency session of both the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of General Security and in this session Saint-Just presented a deposition, he and Robespierre had prepared,

calling for the arrest of Danton and Desmoulins, it would be signed by eighteen of the twenty men present. They would be arrested that night and on 2 April, along with several of Danton's supporters, their trial would begin. When asked for his place of residence Danton arrogantly replied, "my home will soon be in nothingness; my name you will find in the pantheon of history," similarly Desmoulins would convey the same sense of justness. When asked his age, he replied, "thirty-three, the same age as the sansculotte Jesus Christ when he was crucified" (Fife 294-300). All men would be found guilty and sentenced to death by guillotine and on the day of their execution they would meet their death feeling just in their cause. While waiting at the foot of the scaffold Danton attempted to embrace one of his fellow victims only to be forcibly separated in reply he told the executioner, "you won't be able to stop our heads from meeting in the basket" (Fife 303). Once upon the scaffold Danton demanded the executioner to, "show my head to the people it is worth looking at," displaying the fact that he felt just in his actions till the end (Gerould 314). Following the fall of Danton and his followers Robespierre and Saint-Just did away with the right to defense; no longer would they need to pose a trial against their enemies. This would mark the beginning of the end for Robespierre and his increasingly radical Jacobins. A new group of moderates would come to power and soon grow tired of Robespierre's heinous abuses committed against the people of France. Another three thousand people would fall beneath the guillotine before action would be taken against him and his radical followers (O'Kane 63). On 26 July Robespierre gave a two hour long speech to the convention in which he claimed a conspiracy forming within the convention and called for a reorganization of the Convention, in order to do away with his enemies, once and for all. This was met with much anger, because when pressed Robespierre refused to give the names of the accused conspirators this gave rise to members of the Convention to begin calling him a dictator

and a tyrant. Robespierre replied to these accusations by claiming that “he was a slave to Liberty, and his life [was] one of martyrdom to his country” (Fife 394-396). The following day, Robespierre and Saint-Just entered the Convention intent on defending themselves and their accusations of conspiracy within the Convention; this would prove itself impossible they were not allowed to speak, for the first time they met opposition in the Convention. The opposition to them was overwhelming and cries calling out for their indictments could be heard throughout. A vote was taken and the decree for their arrest passed at which point the members of the convention began to yell, “long live the Republic,” Robespierre replied, “the Republic is lost, the brigands triumph” (Fife 400-403). Robespierre, Saint-Just and their followers were sentenced to death without trial and on the evening of their arrest, the eve of their execution, several of the group attempted to commit suicide, including Robespierre. He had attempted to commit suicide by blowing his brains out, hearing commotion a guard burst into the room startling Robespierre and causing his arm to jerk making him shoot out his cheek and shatter his jaw instead. His wounds were tended to and in order to keep his lower jaw from hanging a bandage was tied from below his jaw around his head. The following day Robespierre and his followers were loaded into the tumbrels and driven to the scaffold and as Robespierre, the last to die, reached the summit of the stairs the executioner ripped the bandage from his head letting forth a gush of blood and causing his lower jaw to separate from the upper; Robespierre let forth an agonized cry and moments later was no more. It was later noted by a member of the Convention that “[Robespierre,] who had been the cause of so much anguish to others, suffered as much pain and torment as any mortal could stand before he died” (Fife 410-414). The fall of Robespierre would bring an end to the Reign of Terror and bring about a change to the radical ideas with which it had been guided.

## Conclusion

Dr. Joseph Ignace Guillotin, a true humanitarian, had brought forth an idea intended to put an end to the brutal ways of the *ancien regime*, to bring equality to the penal code of France and in turn to all men and women of France. This enlightened idea would take hold in the hearts and minds of the men guiding the revolution, and would soon become warped and twisted as the revolution spun out of control. The revolution was led by men in search of liberty and whose goal was to create a society that they deemed acceptable, but they soon lost sight of their initial goals. This period of extreme change would prove to be an untimely one for this machine of humanitarian intentions designed to put an end to torture and to ensure a painless death for all those condemned to death. The speed and precision that allowed the machine to fulfill its humanitarian goals and with which it carried out its purpose would soon become the undoing of the revolution. The guillotine made possible the mass executions that soon became the norm; dispatching victim after victim and causing the streets to flow with the blood of its people, the so-called counter-revolutionaries that Robespierre, Danton and their hordes of followers would see as enemies to their cause. The guillotine became the tool they used to rid themselves of these enemies and to forge the Reign of Terror. Through the use of this terrifying machine, they would systematically eliminate all those of royalist intent opening the door to pull down the King and eliminate the monarchy altogether. What they failed to see, in all their wisdom, was that a country ruled by fear would not blindly accept its situation forever and would soon turn on those wielding the power; just as nature itself seeks out balance the revolution exacted its own justice upon the masters of the Terror. Acting as a tool of the Republic, the guillotine took life indiscriminately and like it had brought down the *ancien regime*, ending their stranglehold on French society, it would in turn put an end to Robespierre and his radical cohorts.



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