

from
EXECUTION BY GUILLOTINE
1793

J. G. Millingen

During the course of the French Revolution, execution became the means for the revolutionary government to maintain control and to punish undesirables. Revolutionary courts were established to try hundreds of thousands of French citizens for treason. These courts often found defendants guilty and then sentenced them to die by the guillotine. The following account, by an English eyewitness, describes a guillotine execution.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Summarizing

What aspects of this scene most impressed the author of this account?

Never can I forget the mournful appearance of these funereal processions to the place of execution. The march was opened by a detachment of mounted *gendarmes*¹—the carts followed; they were the same carts as those that are used in Paris for carrying wood; four boards were placed across them for seats, and on each board sat two, and sometimes three victims; their hands were tied behind their backs, and the constant jolting of the cart made them nod their heads up and down, to the great amusement of the spectators. On the front of the cart stood Samson, the executioner, or one of his sons or assistants; *gendarmes* on foot marched by the side; then followed a hackney-coach, in which was the *Rapporteur* and his clerk, whose duty it was to witness the execution, and then return to Fouquier-Tinville, the *Accusateur Publique*² to report the execution of what they called the law.

The process of execution was also a sad and heart-rending spectacle. In the middle of the Place de la Révolution was erected a guillotine, in front of a colossal statue of Liberty, represented seated on a rock, a Phrygian³ cap on her head, a spear in her hand, the other reposing on a shield. On one side of the scaffold were drawn out a sufficient number of carts, with large baskets painted red, to receive the heads and bodies of the victims. Those bearing the condemned moved on slowly to the foot of the guillotine; the culprits were led out in turn, and, if necessary, supported by two of the executioner's valets, . . . but their assistance was rarely required. Most of these unfortunates ascended the scaffold with a determined step—many of them looked up firmly on the menacing instrument of death, beholding for the last time the rays of the glorious sun, beaming on the polished axe; and I have seen some young men actually dance a few steps

1. *gendarmes*: soldiers

2. *Accusateur Publique*: the public prosecutor, Antoine Fouquier-Tinville

3. *Phrygian*: a soft cap, considered a sign of liberty

before they went up to be strapped to the perpendicular plane, which was then tilted to a horizontal plane in a moment, and ran on the grooves until the neck was secured and closed in by a moving board, when the head passed through what was called, in derision, *la lunette républicaine*⁴; the weighty knife was then dropped with a heavy fall; and, with incredible dexterity and rapidity, two executioners tossed the body into the basket, while another threw the head after it.

Source: Excerpt from account by J. G. Millingen, reprinted in *English Witnesses of the French Revolution* by J. M. Thompson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1938).

4. *la lunette républicaine*: the Republican toilet seat

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

Millingen seems shocked by the scene but also impressed by the prisoners approaching the scaffold. He remarks that many appeared strong and unfrightened, and some even danced.