

WAIT, WAIT, DON'T GUILLOTINE ME!

Test – and refresh – your knowledge of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror with this simple multiple-choice quiz!

3. The guillotine was invented:

- A. In Germany and Flanders during the Middle Ages.
- B. In late 1789 by Dr. Joseph-Ignace Guillotin
- C. By the “Tricoteuses.”

Answer: A. In the popular imagination, nothing symbolizes the revolution more vividly than the guillotine, which became its principal means of public execution, accounting for some 17,000 deaths during the “Reign of Terror” of 1793-1794. Its invention is most often attributed to the revolutionary legislator and doctor Joseph-Ignace Guillotin, who himself barely escaped it after being imprisoned during the Terror in 1794.

Actually, while the device may have first seen the light of day in France during the revolution, Guillotin did not invent it. In fact, he opposed the death penalty, and advocated humane and painless execution by a decapitation machine as a first step on the way to the abolition of capital punishment altogether. Guillotin was appalled that the instrument was named after him. His family later unsuccessfully petitioned the French government to change its name in the early 19th century.

Similar execution machines had already been in existence for centuries. A beheading device called the “planke” was used in Germany and Flanders during the Middle Ages, and the English had a sliding axe known as the Halifax Gibbet, which may have been lopping off heads all the way back to antiquity. The French guillotine was likely inspired by two earlier machines: The Renaissance-era “mannaia” from Italy, and the notorious “Scottish Maiden,” which claimed the lives of some 120 people between the 16th and 18th centuries.

People came to the place de la Revolution in droves to watch the guillotine do its grisly work, and the machine was honored in countless songs, jokes, and poems. Spectators could buy souvenirs, read a program listing the names of the victims, or even grab a quick bite to eat at a nearby restaurant called “Cabaret de la Guillotine.” Some people attended on a daily basis, most famously the “Tricoteuses,” a group of morbid women who supposedly sat beside the scaffold and knitted in between beheadings. The theatre even extended to the condemned. Many people offered sarcastic quips or defiant last words before being executed, and others danced their way up the steps of the scaffold. Fascination with the guillotine waned at the end of the 18th century, but public beheadings continued in France until 1939. The guillotine remained in use in France as late as 1977.

Source: “8 Things You May Not Know About the Guillotine,” by Evan Andrews. *History.com*, September 15, 2014.

