

The Execution of the King

By Miss Lavelle www.SchoolHistory.co.uk

The Verdict: The outcome of Louis's trial was decided by a vote. The Jury of deputies had to answer three questions. Firstly, they had to decide whether or not Louis was guilty. All 693 deputies answered 'Yes'. Secondly, they had to decide whether there should be a referendum to decide his fate. 284 deputies said 'Yes', the rest said 'No'. Finally, the deputies were asked what the punishment should be. 321 said 'prison or exile', whilst 374 said the punishment should be death.

21st January 1793 – the day of the execution – preparations are made: The Convention needed to make sure that Louis's execution went smoothly. Troops were stationed at the entrances to the city to prevent crowds from entering or leaving. 200 Mounted guards and 1200 foot soldiers were to surround Louis's coach. There were around 80,000 armed men in Paris to ensure that problems did not arise. Louis's own preparations included having a final meeting with his family (source 1), attending mass at 6 o'clock in the morning, and passing on instructions to Clery, his servant (source 2).



Source 1. Louis meets with his family for the last time.

Source 2. Louis's instructions to Clery

"Will you give this seal to my son...the wedding ring to the Queen. Tell her that I leave her with a great deal of pain.

This little package contains locks of hair of all my family. Give it to her too. Tell the Queen, tell my dear children, that I had promised to see them this morning, but that I had wanted to spare them the pain of such a cruel separation."

The Execution... at around 10 o'clock, Louis arrived at the guillotine. At 10.22, he was dead. (see sources 3 and 4) As soon as the head came off, there were shouts from the crowd (see source 5). Louis body was quickly taken to a cemetery in a wicker basket. He was then place in a wooden coffin and buried in a mass grave. The Convention made every attempt to suppress any details of Louis last few days, in case a legend built up around his memory.



Keywords! Learn Them!

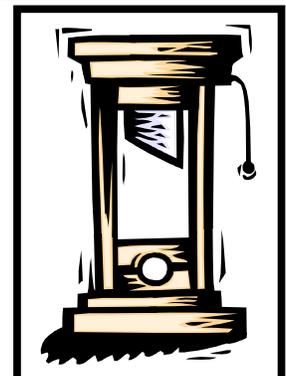
REFERENDUM – a way of deciding a political question by voting for or against it.

EXILE – banishment from country.

GUILLOTINE – French invention to chop off heads! (see picture)

LEGEND – stories and myths which build up around a certain person or event, usually to paint a positive or heroic picture of them!

LIBERTY – Freedom from oppression.



Sources 3 and 4 give two accounts of the execution of Louis.

Source 3 - a description of the execution by Mercier, a deputy to the Convention.

"His blood flows; cries of joy from 80,000 armed men rend the air. His blood flows and there are people who dip a fingertip, a quill, a scrap of paper in it. One tastes it: 'It is vilely salt!' An executioner at the scaffold side sells small bundles of his hair; people buy the ribbon that tied it. Everyone carries off a small bundle of his clothing or some other blood-stained remnant. The whole populace go by, arm in arm, laughing and talking as if from some festivity. The taverns on the bloody square had their wine bottles emptied as usual. They sold cakes and patties around the beheaded body, which was put in the wicker basket of a common criminal."

Source 4 - a description of the execution by Bernard, a supporter of Louis.

"Louis XVI lost his life on Monday at half past ten in the morning, and to the very last he maintained the greatest possible courage.

He wished to speak to the people from the scaffold, but was seized by the executioners, who were following their orders, and who pushed him straight under the fatal blade. He was able to speak only these words: 'I forgive my enemies; I trust that my death will be for the happiness of my people, but I grieve for France and I fear that she may suffer the anger of the Lord.'

The King took of his coat himself at the foot of the scaffold, and when someone sought to help him he said cheerfully, 'I do not need any help.' He also refused help to climb onto the scaffold, and went up with a firm, brisk step.

After his death his body and head were immediately taken to the parish cemetery and thrown into a pit fifteen feet deep, where they were consumed by quicklime. And so there remains nothing of this unhappy prince except the memory of his virtues and his misfortune."

Saucy Source words!

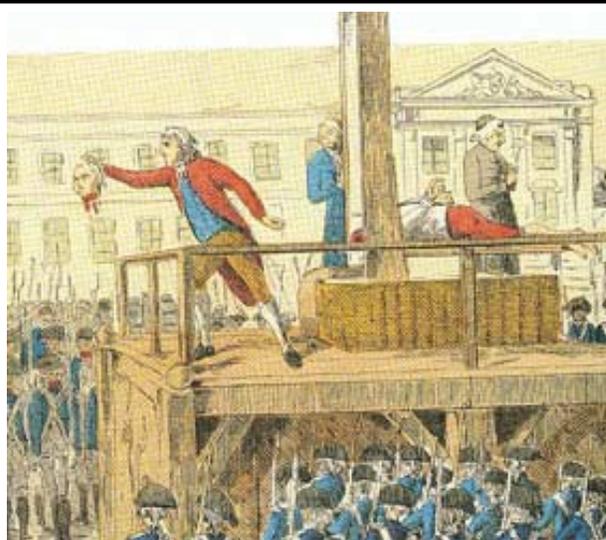
Sometimes written sources use descriptive words to emphasise a particular point or to encourage the reader to feel a particular way. It is important to read written sources very carefully, and to use a dictionary for any tricky words. Someone who did not support the king wrote source 3. The words and phrases he uses, like 'vilely', meaning horrible and 'wicker basket of a common criminal' are there to subtly put-down Louis XVI. Source 4 was written by a supporter of Louis and so is much less jolly. It has a more reverent feel to it with phrases like, 'lost his life' and 'virtues', meaning morals. The writer's description of Louis speech lets the reader feel that Louis has martyred himself by giving his life for France. Some of the other words in both sources have been underlined to help you answer some questions later on. Try and find out what they mean!

Source 5 - The crowd's cheers as Louis's head is severed from his body.

"Long live the Republic!
Long live liberty! Long live equality!"



Source 6 - A sketch of Louis Execution, January 1793.



Source 7. Extracts from a modern historian's account of the execution.

"He (Louis) pronounced these unforgettable words: 'I die innocent of all the crimes with which I am charged. I forgive those that are guilty of my death, and I pray God that the blood you are about to shed will never be required of France!...The king's last words were drowned out by the drummers...'"

