

# Tricoteuses: Knitting During the Reign of Terror

The French Revolution, whose roots began in 1787 and continued until 1799, marked the creation of the modern era. It is widely considered one of the seminal events in human history. The Revolution's origin stemmed from a complex interaction of factors including: (1) the political aspirations of a growing class of wealthy commoners (called the bourgeoisie); (2) the loss of support for the feudal system among the peasant class; (3) the wide dissemination of writings by influential social philosophers such as Rousseau; (4) the royal government's significant debt following its support of the American Revolutionary War; (5) enormous population growth combined with crop failures; and (6) a weakened French monarchy.

A series of consequential events occurred in 1789, rapidly advancing the principles of the Revolution. On May 5, 1789, the Estates-General met at Versailles, the royal complex that housed King Louis XVI and his government. The Estates-General consisted of the First Estate (the clergy), the Second Estate (the nobility), and the Third Estate (the commoners). The meeting of the Estates-General was contentious, as the Third Estate asserted their growing power. The meeting lasted for over two months, ultimately resulting in the formation of a new political body, the National Constituent Assembly.

On July 14, 1789, fearing attempts by the king to overthrow the Third Estate, crowds stormed the Bastille. The Bastille was a fortress and prominent symbol of the monarchy in Paris. Less than a month later, on August 4, 1789, the National Constituent Assembly abolished the feudal system. The feudal system was based on peasants receiving land in exchange for service and loyalty to the king or nobility. Then on August 26, 1789, the National Constituent Assembly passed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. This was a fundamental document of the French Revolution, significantly influenced by Thomas Jefferson and the American Declaration of Independence of 1776. One of the writers of the French document was the Marquis de Lafayette, who served on General George Washington's staff during the American Revolution.

Following these tumultuous events, on October 5, 1789, thousands of working women from the markets of Paris marched to Versailles demanding an end to the chronic food shortages. They also demanded that King Louis XVI and his wife, Marie Antoinette, leave Versailles and relocate to Paris. The following day, King Louis XVI acceded to the demands of the market women and left Versailles. These events, known as the October Days, signaled a marked shift in power between the monarchy and the Third Estate.

The events also significantly elevated the status of the revolutionary market women. For a time, the market women were praised and heralded for their role in the Revolution. But by 1793, as the revolutionary government became increasingly authoritarian, the market women would lose their status as respected political participants. As the revolutionary government's Reign of Terror took hold, the market women maintained their involvement in the Revolution by moving from their seats in the galleries of the National Convention to seats near the guillotine in the Place de la Révolution.

Here they became the tricoteuses, or the knitting women who impassively watched the scores of executions that took place in the public square. During the Reign of Terror (September 1793 – July 1794), 17,000 people who were considered enemies of the Revolution were executed. An estimated 10,000 people died in prison or without any form of trial.

The tricoteuses served as the basis for one of Charles Dickens' most famous fictional characters, Madame Defarge, in his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*. In this novel about the French Revolution, the character of Madame Defarge stitches the names of those to be executed. The image of the tricoteuse also makes an appearance in Baroness Emma Orczy's novel *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, set during the Reign of Terror. In the beginning of the novel, the Pimpernel disguises himself as one of the knitting women. To this day, tricoteuses are synonymous with the violence and upheaval that characterized the French Revolution.

**Questions**

1. Name three causes of the French Revolution.
2. Summarize the key events of 1789.
3. Why were the October Days important from a political perspective?
4. How would you characterize the tricoteuses of the Reign of Terror?