

The Guillotine in WWII by David Gray

British Newspaper article 28th August 1941:

'PARIS DEATH SENTENCES

A Paris court martial has sentenced one Russian and two Frenchmen to death in the first trials of Communists. Others were sentenced to various terms of hard labour. The former secretary of the Communist paper "Humanite," was sentenced to hard labour for life.

The hearings took place in private, and sentences were put into operation immediately. The executions were to have taken place at dawn today on the guillotine at the Sante Prison in Paris, but Ministry of Justice officials stated today that there was no confirmation that the sentences had been carried out.'

During World War II, the guillotine was the primary method of state-sanctioned execution in Nazi Germany. Known as the Fallbeil (falling axe), it was used to kill approximately 16,500 people between 1933 and 1945, across various prisons, primarily within Germany. The victims were mainly German citizens, and nationals from occupied countries who resisted the Nazi regime. There was a massive surge of 10,000 executions occurring in the final two years of the war alone.

Use by Nazi Germany



While Hitler initially hesitated to use the device due to its associations with the French Revolution, he authorized it by 1936 as an efficient "humane" alternative to hanging for civil crimes and political resistance.

All 30 persons executed in Munich's Stadelheim Prison (*left*), between the Nazi accession to power and the outbreak of World War II had been convicted of murder.

The situation changed when the war started: Now the Nazi justice system became much more active and aggressive. The number of capital punishment provisions exploded and with it the number of executions. The procedural rules were tightened and judges were under pressure to impose the maximum penalties.

Offenses that could be linked to the war were now prosecuted with particular severity, for example the theft of a bicycle or a suitcase during the blackout. This was a lesson the Nazis had learned from World War I. According to the narrative, back then the judiciary had been too lenient, and that's why Germany had lost the war. This idea was deeply ingrained in the judges' minds. The number of death sentences executed in Stadelheim before 1942 was 136; between 1942 and 1945 it shot up to over 1,000.

With few exceptions, most victims in Stadelheim were executed by guillotine. The guillotine was concealed behind a curtain in a converted tool shed draped in black cloth, directly adjacent to the cell block of the new building. At first, executions were staged ceremonially. Later they were carried out at

a rate of one per minute, and steps that took up any time—for example the tolling of the death knell—were omitted. On May 7, 1943, for instance, 17 people were executed at Stadelheim in less than an hour. In Vienna and Berlin, over 30 executions were sometimes carried out in a single day.

- **Design:** The German *Fallbeil* was typically made of metal, standing about 8 feet tall (shorter than the classic 14-foot French version) and featuring a winch instead of a pulley for more reliable mechanical release.
- **Speed:** Executions were chillingly rapid; executioner Johann Reichhart developed techniques to shorten the process to just 3–4 seconds.
- **Key Locations:** Major execution centres included Plötzensee Prison in Berlin, Stadelheim Prison in Munich, and Brandenburg-Görden.
- **Victims:** The guillotine was used for political dissidents, including members of the White Rose resistance (such as Sophie and Hans Scholl), the Red Orchestra (*Rote Kapelle*), and individuals convicted of "defeatism" or listening to foreign radio.



Hans and Sophie Scholl, (left), were a brother and sister who were members of the White Rose, a student group in Munich that was active in the non-violent resistance movement in Nazi Germany, especially in distributing flyers against the war and the dictatorship of Adolf Hitler.

On February 18, 1943, Hans and Sophie, were handing out flyers at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, when they were caught by the custodian, Jakob

Schmid, who informed the Gestapo. By February 22, 1943, they had been sentenced to death by the People's Court, and were executed by guillotine on the same day in the Stadelheim Prison. Their grave is in the adjacent Perlacher Forst cemetery.

Use in France

France continued to use the guillotine as its sole method of execution throughout WWII, including during the German occupation and under the **Vichy** regime.

The Vichy government in France used the **guillotine** as a method of execution during World War II, primarily for a range of domestic crimes that the regime sought to punish severely, including **abortion** and communist activities.

Executions by the Vichy Regime

While German occupation forces in France often used firing squads for Resistance members and hostages, the Vichy government continued to employ the guillotine as the official legal method for capital punishment for civil crimes within its jurisdiction.

Key aspects of these executions:

- **Capital Crimes:** The Vichy regime escalated certain crimes to capital offenses, most notably making abortion a capital crime "against the security of the state".
- **Notable Executions:**
 - **Marie-Louise Giraud** was one of the most prominent individuals executed. She was guillotined on July 30, 1943, for performing 27 abortions and became one of the last women executed in France.
 - **Désiré Pioge**, a male abortionist, was also guillotined a few months after Giraud, in October 1943.
 - The Vichy executioner, Jules-Henri Desfourneaux, also executed communists and members of the French Resistance, including the partisan leader, **Marcel Langer**.



After the German invasion of France, Langer (*left*), co-founded the FTP-MOI resistance movement in the Toulouse and commanded a unit he named the 35th Brigade in honour of the 35th Division of the International Brigades, in which he fought. The 35 Brigade was made up of, among others, Spanish and international veterans from Spain and Jews from Eastern Europe. Langer was arrested with a suitcase filled with explosives in February 1943. During his trial, the prosecutor is said to have told him: 'You are a Jew, a foreigner and a communist - three reasons why I should demand your head'.

"If I have to die, in my last moments I will behave like a revolutionary worker" declared Langer in a letter from prison.

On 23 July 1943 he was executed by guillotine. Before the execution, he is supposed to have said to the assembled officers: "I die for France and for a better society. Long live France, long live free man!".

His comrades shot a German soldier on the same day to avenge their commander. The 35th Brigade was subsequently renamed the Marcel Langer Brigade.

Public executions were banned in France on June 17, 1939, following the unruly behaviour of the crowd during the execution of serial killer Eugen Weidmann; thereafter, all French guillotining took place behind prison walls.

Post-War Legacy

- West Germany: Abolished the death penalty and stopped using the guillotine in 1949.

- East Germany: Continued using the *Fallbeil* for secret executions until 1966.
- France: The guillotine remained the official method of execution until the death penalty was abolished in 1981.