

## The French Revolution seen by the British

When the French Revolution started, it aroused great enthusiasm in the English population. However when Terror began, English support faded away and turned into opposition.



**Document : a satirical point of view on the French Revolution**

*The Zenith of French Glory, engraving by James Gillray, 1793, New College, Oxford.)*

### WORD BOX

**The zenith** : apogée

**A bishop's crozier** : une crosse d'évêque

**A scaffold** = the guillotine

**A church dome**

**A crucifix**

**Atheism**

**A lamp bracket** : un support de lampe

**A fiddler** = a violinist

**A cockade** : une cocarde

**A dagger** : un poignard

**A pike** : une pique

**The executioner** : le bourreau

**Crude/coarse/satirical/cruel**

**A sansculotte**

**To hang** : pendre

**Bloody/ bloodthirsty / the Terror**

**Breeches** : culotte

**Ragged** : en lambeaux

**Cap of "Libertas"**: bonnet phrygien

- 1) Identify the document (nature, origin, author, historical context)
- 2) What period of the French Revolution is illustrated in this document?
- 3) Describe the document.
- 4) What figures of authority are destroyed by the French Revolution, according to James Gillray?
- 5) Explain why the title and the caption of the flag "vive l'égalité" are ironic.

## Correction:

1) This document is a hand-coloured engraving entitled "The zenith of French Glory". The British caricaturist James Gillray drew this etching in 1793 to commemorate the beheading of Louis XVI (note the crown on the guillotine's blade). Beneath the title is written "Religion, Justice, Loyalty, & all the Bugbears of Unenlightened Minds, Farewell!". It was made during the period of the French Revolution. In 1793, the end of the monarchy, the regicide and the reign of Terror caused great dismay among British public opinion. This led the government to launch an anti-revolutionary campaign. Activated by popular caricaturists (like J. Gillray), it ostracized former supporters of the French Revolution.

### 3) Description:

On the level of the eye, but high above a square in which the guillotine is at work, bodies dangle from lamp-brackets projecting from the wall of a high building on the right. A bishop in his robes and two monks, their hands tied, hang close together from the horizontal bar. On the lantern sits a ragged, bare-legged sansculotte (he is literally sans culottes without breeches at all) playing a fiddle, looking down with smiling triumph at the crowd; he is in back view, his bony right foot planted on the head of the dead bishop. On his cap are the words 'Ca ira', the song of the working class radicals of the French revolution.

. He wears a bag-wig and two daggers dripping blood are thrust through his belt. To the bracket is tied the bishop's crozier, surmounted by the cap of 'Libertas'. In the wall immediately behind is a crucifix in a niche; at its foot are a skull and cross-bones. From another projecting lantern in the middle distance hangs a judge in his robes between the scales and sword of Justice, similarly suspended.

The high scaffold is surrounded by a sea of bonnets-rouges, waving exultantly as the guillotine falls on Louis XVI. A ragged and grinning sansculotte hauls at the wheel which releases the blade (on which is a crown). From the guillotine flies a tricolour flag inscribed 'Vive l'Égalité'. Ragged sansculottes holding spears stand on the scaffold. The windows of the adjoining houses are crowded with spectators. Above their roofs a church dome is on fire.

### 4) The king + the Church (priests = bishop, monks) + Justice (the Judge)

5) Gillray produced one of the most famous of his anti-revolutionary prints, *The Zenith of French Glory; The Pinnacle of Liberty* on 1793, February 12<sup>th</sup>, which featured the execution of the French King. Following the practice he had begun in 1792, Gillray portrayed the revolutionary sansculottes not in their preferred working class pantaloons but literally sans culottes without breeches at all. And given the prominence of the clergymen and judge hanging from the lantern posts in *The Zenith of French Glory* it is likely that he had heard the revolutionary anthem *Ca ira* in its more radical form which contained lines like the following:

*All will be well, all will be well!*

*We'll have no more nobles or priests.*

*The aristocrats will swing from the posts.*

*And equality will reign in the streets.*

The sans-culotte fiddler with his bloody daggers in *Zenith* may be playing the *Ca ira*, but with the burning church in the background, it's hard not to associate this image of heartless barbarity with the infamous cruelty of Nero who supposedly fiddled while Rome burned. So according to him, there is not more equality (the sansculotte seems to impose a new order), and no glory (blood, hangings, death, the burning church dome): it looks like hell. James Gillray suggests that the beheading of Louis, with its disrespect for the monarchy, has resulted in anarchy in France.