Joseph-Ignace Guillotin Encyclopedia Article

Joseph-Ignace Guillotin

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Joseph-Ignace Guillotin

1738-1814

French physician who, during the French Revolution, proposed decapitation by a mechanical device as a more humanitarian means of executing criminals than the torture then in use. Such mechanisms were used in Europe until about 1700 to execute nobles; Guillotin simply advocated their revival and more egalitarian use. Adopted in 1792, the device quickly became the symbol of the "Reign of Terror." The public named it the guillotine, an "honor" Guillotin abhorred since he neither invented it nor approved of its use against political enemies.