The Saint Bartholomew's Massacre: A European Site of Memory

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The French Wars of Religion, fought between the country's Catholic majority and the one to two million members of the Reformed churches, flared up recurrently for thirty-six years from 1562 to 1598. A second series of smaller conflicts followed between 1621 and 1629. In the course of the first and deadliest cycle of these wars, one king was assassinated and two princes of the blood were killed in battle. Cities large and small, including Paris, resisted long sieges at the cost of mass starvation, or fell and were brutally sacked in the course of the eight civil wars that historians conventionally distinguish within this period. Even in times of formal peace, especially in the years between 1560 and 1572, Catholic anger at the presence of heretics in their midst flared up into crowd violence, resulting in the worst instances in massacres killing dozens or even hundreds of "Huguenots", as the Protestants were called. At the same time, Huguenot crowds or army units attacked and killed Catholic clerics, stripped Catholic churches of their images and altarpieces, and profaned royal and aristocratic tombs.

Amid so much death, destruction and violence, one episode impressed itself upon

French and European memory more profoundly than all others: the Saint Bartholomew's massacre. It began with the killing of Admiral Gaspard de Coligny and other leading Huguenot aristocrats on the night of August 24, 1572, quickly metamorphosed into an attack on ordinary Parisian Protestants that lasted for four days, and spread to a dozen or more provincial cities. Why did this particular episode from the religious wars capture the imagination of great novelists, playwrights, historians and political philosophers for centuries to come? There were many reasons. It was at once a central event in the national political narrative and the era's deadliest episode of crowd religious violence. In its immediate aftermath, it seemed for a while that it might effect the complete elimination of the Reformed faith in France; hence it seemed to confirm what the Protestants had long believed, namely that the church of Rome sought their total eradication. Furthermore, it broke out when all of the high aristocracy of the realm was gathered at court to celebrate a marriage meant to culminate two years of effort by the king and queen mother to broker an enduring reconciliation between the two religious parties—efforts that now could appear to have been an elaborate charade to lure the Protestants into a fatal trap. Once the violence began, the crown issued contradictory orders and offered contradictory explanations of what happened. The foreign ambassadors whose business it was to understand and report on political affairs disagreed about who decided to launch the massacre, when, and why. The event thus contained elements of a royal murder mystery as well as ample doses of tragedy, drama, and pathos. Finally, depending upon the perspective from which it was seen, the massacre could stand as a warning about many things. To anti-clericals and freethinkers, it was the ultimate illustration of the dangers of religious fanaticism; Voltaire claimed that he ran a

fever every Saint Bartholomew's day. To militant Protestants it illustrated Catholic perfidy and the Roman church's desire to eliminate the light of truth by any means necessary. Panegyrists of the Bourbon dynasty could see King Charles IX's role in the event as a symbol of the weakness and degeneracy of the final generation of the preceding Valois line, now fortunately replaced by their Bourbon successors. Republicans could see the same thing as proof of the danger of all hereditary monarchies. Theorists of reason of state could use the event to reflect upon whether or not rulers were justified in occasionally taking extraordinary measures against over mighty factions, and upon how to carry out such *coups de majesté* successfully. Most simply, the scale of the killings and the prominence of the victims meant that it became the great synecdoche for eliminationist violence within the French political imagination until eclipsed first by the Terror and then by the Shoah.

The Event

Before examining how later generations recalled and construed the massacre, a brief narrative of the event is required. On August 22, with the leading noblemen of both faiths gathered in Paris for the royal wedding, an assailant fired a shot at the admiral Coligny as he returned to his lodgings. The shot wounded the admiral but did not kill him. It has generally been assumed that the would-be killer was put up to the attack by a high-placed figure, but the identity of the person responsible would never be definitively established. The leading Protestant nobles angrily demanded that an investigation be opened and justice done. The king agreed, but the threats and warnings of the Huguenots

also sparked fear among leading court figures that the Protestants might take matters into their own hands and attempt to seize control of the king, as they had already tried and failed to do twice previously. A meeting was held in the Louvre late on the night of August 23 attended by the king, his younger brother the duke of Anjou (the future Henry III), the queen mother Catherine de Medici, and several prominent noblemen. No definitive evidence exists to indicate just what was decided there and how great the role of each participant was in convincing the group that action had to be taken against the Huguenots. What is known is that in the wee hours of the morning of August 24, armed men led by the duke of Guise forced their way into Coligny's lodgings, killed him, and went on to slay a number of other leading Huguenot nobles. Word spread around the capital that the king had ordered these killings. Militant Catholics began to hunt down and kill Protestants throughout the city. The king reacted to this extension of the violence by ordering the killing to stop. He also provided his officers different accounts of what had sparked the initial violence. A first letter blamed Coligny's murder on his archenemy the duke of Guise. A second letter asserted that Charles IX himself had commanded the killing of the Protestant grandees as an act of expeditive royal justice "to prevent the execution of an unhappy and detestable conspiracy begun by the admiral . . . and his adherents and accomplices". As word of the violence in Paris spread to the provinces, local authorities or ultra-Catholic elements within the population of a number of cities imitated the capital's example, most often as soon as news of the Paris massacre arrived, in a few instances as late as six weeks after the event. Over these same weeks, even while continuing to assert that he wished the tolerant terms of the 1570 peace of Saint-Germain to remain in effect, the king ordered Protestant services to cease. The best modern

estimates of the total death toll of the violence place it at between five and ten thousand people. Many more Huguenots either abjured or fled abroad. Virtually all French Reformed churches ceased to function.

Early Reactions

The earliest reports of the event struggled to construct a coherent account of the chaotic scenes of violence. A letter sent by a Catholic informant in Lyon days after the event and published as an *avviso* [news pamphlet] in Venice mentioned Charles IX's acceptance of responsibility for the killing of Coligny and reported that he expressly ordered that no Huguenot be left alive. A burgher of Strasbourg present in Paris at the time made a notarized deposition in Heidelberg September 7 in which he recorded a series of scenes he claimed to have directly witnessed, including the dismemberment of Coligny's body after it was recovered from the Seine and the drowning of a beautiful pregnant woman who had been stripped naked and whose unborn child could be seen to be moving in her womb as she was thrown into the river. This account, too, noted the king's acceptance of responsibility for the killing and reported that he said that he had wanted to do the same thing four years previously. A month after the event a pamphlet by a papal courtier, Camillo Capilupi, published in Rome claimed that the massacre had been planned two years previously and that all of the subsequent policies of Charles IX had been calculated to lure the leading Protestant noblemen into the Parisian trap. This was the origin of the thesis of the premeditation of the massacre, destined for a long life.

Militant Catholics both within and outside France hailed the news. Pamphlets

printed in Paris in the weeks and months afterwards crowed that justice had finally been done. Celebratory masses were said in Rome and Madrid. The Venetian Senate lauded the deed. Both the French crown and the papacy forged medals, a form of commemoration whose durability would prove embarrassing in later centuries as reprobation of the massacre became the norm and images of the medals were regularly reproduced by historians. Three scenes depicting the massacre were included among the fifteen frescoes illustrating great victories of the church that Giorgio Vasari was then painting for the Vatican's Sala Regia, where foreign dignitaries were received and the most important conclaves held.

In Germany and England Protestants reacted with dismay and anger. French ambassadors were snubbed or insulted at Protestant courts. In Poland, where French envoys had just come to press the case for the election of the duke of Anjou to the Polish throne, the arrival of the news of the massacre sparked such revulsion "that in a few hours most people despised the name France." Even the Emperor Maximilian II, an irenic Catholic (and rival candidate for the Polish throne), judged the massacre a "shameful bloodbath".

To counter this negative reaction and establish that the killing of the leading Huguenot aristocrats had been necessary to protect the king's safety, the crown had Coligny posthumously tried by the highest court of the land, the Parlement of Paris. He was found guilty of lèse majesté and conspiracy and condemned to an extraordinary *damnatio memoriae*: his effigy was to be hung on the public gibbet; his coat of arms was ordered defaced and removed from any public location in which it was found; his goods were forfeited to the crown; his heirs were stripped of their nobility; his principal chateau

was ordered razed and the trees surrounding it cut off at the trunk; and a commemorative procession was established to be held annually in Paris on Saint Bartholomew's Day to thank God for thwarting the conspiracy. The crown also multiplied officially commissioned accounts of the event while instructing those of its officials who had independently written histories not to publish these lest they contradict the official accounts.

Try as it might, the crown could not control the understanding of the event, for leading Protestant ministers and intellectuals in Geneva and elsewhere made sure to compile and circulate ample accounts based on eyewitness testimony, often published together with contemporary documents that exposed the contradictory utterances of the crown. One key work was François Hotman's *De Furoribus Gallicis*, printed at least eight times in four languages (Latin, French, German and English), which described the massacre in detail in a series of vivid vignettes and identified Catherine de Medici as the person most responsible for it. Hotman also defended Admiral Coligny's reputation by writing a biography that cast him as a paragon of piety and an able commander and counselor loyal to king and country. Another key work was the anonymous *Reveille-matin des François et de leurs voisins*, also published in multiple editions in 1573. This laid primary responsibility at the feet of the king himself, even charging him with having personally fired upon fleeing Protestants, an image destined to have a long afterlife. The attribution of responsibility to the king was an important step in the radicalization of Huguenot theories of the right of resistance.

From 1576 to 1789

Within a few years, French Catholic glorification of or praise for the event muted considerably. Chiefly this was because the armed Protestant resistance that began immediately after the massacre in a few towns such as La Rochelle proved so successful that by 1576 Reformed worship had revived in many parts of the country and the crown had been forced once again to grant it toleration. The massacre had not proven to be the end of Protestantism in France as many Catholics had first hoped. Furthermore, clauses in the edicts of pacification of 1576 and 1577 rehabilitated Coligny's memory and forbade processions commemorating the massacre. Throughout the subsequent generations of the Ancien Régime, the most vehemently anti-Protestant Catholic histories generally passed over the massacre as quickly as possible, although a few continued to laud it as an example of the wicked rightly punished, and the theorist of reason of state Gabriel Naudé praised the killing, which he thought to be carefully premeditated. His *Science des Princes, ou considérations politiques sur les coups d'état* (1636) judged it an outstanding instance of necessary deception. However, following the lead of Jacques-Auguste de Thou, many leading French Catholic historians now deplored the massacre. Divided over the question of premeditation, they variously allocated the responsibility for it between the wicked Italian queen-mother, the excessively ambitious house of Guise, a king who lacked the fortitude to control his violent impulses, and the many-headed monster that was the Parisian populace.

French and non-French Protestants alike meanwhile continued to recall what the Germans began to call the *Bluthochzeit* with an insistence that made it an essential part of Huguenot identity and an important element of European anti-Catholicism as a whole. A

detailed narrative of the massacres was incorporated into all editions of the Huguenot *Book of Martyrs* from 1582 onward. The reading notes of a late seventeenth-century Huguenot pastor show that he paid particular attention to these pages of the book, recording its estimate that 30,000 of the faithful perished, then adding in the margin "or 100 thousand", an estimate originally derived from the *Reveille-Matin des François* and subsequently also repeated by some Catholic historians. The chronology of plays and pamphlets retelling the story of the massacre in early modern England shows that these consistently appeared at moments when fears of Catholicism ran high. Christopher Marlowe's *Massacre in Paris*, the earliest known dramatic treatment of the event, was first staged in 1593-94 as the wars of the Catholic League raged in France. Nathaniel Lee wrote a play with the same title in 1681 amid the domestic political crisis sparked by the attempt to exclude the Catholic heir-apparent James from the throne; this was not first performed until 1689, following the Glorious Revolution. Pamphlets narrating the horrible French massacre “forged in the shop of the bishop of Rome” appeared in both 1618, the year the Thirty Years War broke out, and 1680, again amid the Exclusion Crisis. In some militantly Protestant parts of the English-speaking world, accounts of the massacre designed to warn about Catholic perfidy continued to appear into the late twentieth century. In 1972, the four hundredth anniversary of the event, the great clerical spokesman of Northern Irish Unionist militancy Ian Paisley wrote a work in this vein.

Enlightenment authors wrote about the massacre less to defend one faith at the expense of another than to criticize all "fanaticism" and "priestcraft". Voltaire’s epic poem the *Henriade* (1723) highlighted the “inhuman zeal” of the clerics who called on the people to arm themselves for murder. Narrating the massacre from the perspective of

Henry IV, it denounced the "deceitfulness and rage" of both Geneva and Rome. It also regretted that the state did not leave vengeance to the heavens but instead took up the defense of one religion or the other. In this poem but also in such prose works as the *Essay sur l'histoire générale* (1756), Voltaire divided the responsibility for initiating the massacre between Catherine and Charles, characterizing the former as wicked and the latter as misguided. His depiction of Catherine plotting the massacre two years in advance and of Charles firing on the crowd from a window in the Louvre helped bring tropes already present in partisan accounts of the massacre into broader circulation. Indeed, as the eighteenth century progressed, the image of the king firing on his subjects became an increasingly common *lieu de mémoire*. Published descriptions of Paris pointed out the location of the window–or the place where the window is alleged to have been–though there was no common agreement about just which window it was.

If blame for the massacre occupied a prominent place in Enlightenment writings, praise for those who refused to participate also intensified. Already by the later seventeenth century, Catholic historians called attention to certain aristocratic governors who refused to carry out the orders they allegedly received to kill all of the Huguenots. Montesquieu's *De l'Esprit des lois* (1748) illustrated aristocratic virtue through the example of the vicomte d'Orte, the commander at Bayonne alleged to have refused to do the king's bidding. Jean Hennuyer, the bishop of Lisieux, was even said to have procured the spontaneous conversion of all of that city's Protestants by countermanding the royal directive. Louis-Sébastien Mercier wrote a play about Hennuyer first performed in Lausanne on the two hundredth anniversary of the massacre. Such works furthered the notion that there are moral limits on royal power.

From the French Revolution to the Present

By the time of the French Revolution, Charles IX's complicity in the bloodshed on Saint Bartholomew's Day was so widely accepted that it was a useful weapon against the ancien régime. When news of Necker's removal first reached Paris on July 12, 1789, Camille Desmoulins exclaimed at the Palais Royal, "After such an act they will dare anything, and they may perhaps be planning and preparing a Saint-Bartholomew massacre of patriots for this very night". Several years later, during the Revolution's most radical phase, journalist Jean-Paul Marat justified the popular violence then taking place in Paris by asking, "What are the few drops of blood that the populace has spilled in the current revolution by comparison with the torrents . . . that the mystical frenzy of a Charles IX caused to be spread?" The trope of Charles IX firing on his subjects came to epitomize the treachery of kings. The great orator Mirabeau, discoursing on freedom of conscience in the National Assembly, gestured toward the window of the neighboring Louvre, where "a French king, armed against his own subjects by detestable factions, . . . shot the harquebus that gave the signal for the Saint Bartholomew's Massacre". Mirabeau may have garnered this image from Voltaire, Mercier, or any number of histories of France, but it was Marie-Joseph Chénier's play *Charles IX* , one of the biggest hits of the revolutionary stage, that brought the image to a broad popular audience and used it to inflame growing anger against the king. For Danton, *Charles IX* "struck a death blow to royalty"; for Camille Desmoulins, it "advanced our cause as much as the October Days".

Historians, playwrights, novelists and artists devoted even more attention to the

massacre during the Restoration and July Monarchy, to the point where one observer exclaimed in 1830, "That Saint Bartholomew . . . has given birth to more books in our day than in the sixteenth century". Chiefly the work of liberals and Protestants, the many plays and histories devoted to the topic generally used the event to symbolize the crimes of monarchical power and religious fanaticism, although an important minority by more conservative authors cast the massacre as either the purely political crime of a foreign queen or a necessary defense of throne and altar against Protestants drunk with novelty and liberty. With the vogue for historical novels, the era of the last Valois kings also became a favorite setting for stories in which royal treachery and civil war provided a colorful background for fictional narratives of romance and intrigue. The German composer Giacomo Meyerbeer even placed the denouement of his 1835 opera of star-crossed love, *The Huguenots,* on the night of the massacre. The most famous historical novel about it was unquestionably Alexandre Dumas's *La reine Margot,* which gave a new twist to the now expected balcony scene by placing Henry of Navarre in it. In Dumas's version of the story, Charles is furious because Henry has refused his choice of "death, the mass, or the Bastille". In a rage, he picks up an harquebus and begins firing at a man running along the quay: "Animated by a frightful ardor, Charles loaded and fired his harquebus without cessation, uttering cries of joy every time his aim was successful." This image was a lasting one. Edmond and Jules de Goncourt claimed to have overheard a man in a cabaret telling the story of Charles IX as recounted in *La reine Margot*; Alexandre Dumas had become "the history teacher of the masses".

While historical novelists embroidered a dramatic presentation of the massacre, the growing insistence of nineteenth-century historians on reliable documentary evidence

began to sap components of the story most chose to tell. Between the 1826 publication of Ludwig Wachler's *Die Pariser Bluthochzeit* and the 1855 publication of Wilhelm Gottlieb Soldan's *Geschichte der Protestantismus in Frankreich bis zum Tode Karl's IX*, an international group of scholars demonstrated that the diplomatic records of the various European powers provided no basis to assume that the massacre had been planned years in advance, as most plays and histories alleged. Although the thesis of premeditation was revived in 1869 by the English liberal Catholic historian Lord Acton and in 1879 by the French Protestant historian Henri Bordier, by the last years of the nineteenth century it was effectively dead among serious historians. Critical scholarship also proved that the image of Charles IX shooting at the Huguenots had no plausibility and found no written orders to eliminate all Huguenots in the wake of the Parisian violence.

Still, confessional tensions were anything but dead in the second half of the nineteenth century, nor was the battle finished between monarchists and republicans. The massacre continued to be regularly referenced in literature and in political debates. Emile Zola gave the story of Charles IX firing from the Louvre balcony a democratic spin in *L'Assommoir* (1877), referring to the balcony from which Charles "fired on *le peuple*". Amid France's debates surrounding the separation of church and state, one militant anti-Protestant complained in 1905, "as soon as one starts to state the case against the politics of the Huguenots, [they] answer . . . with Saint Bartholomew's day here and the Dragonnades there, and within five minutes you are transformed into an inquisitor."

Since Hotman's *Life of Coligny*, praise for the Admiral at least implicitly evoked blame for the massacre. In 1878, the pastor-historian Eugène Bersier, vice-president of the Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français, launched the idea of erecting a

monument in his honor. To the regret of some, it was decided not to locate it at the spot where the first attack on him had occurred, lest it seem a work of expiation. Instead, it was placed alongside the apse of the Protestant temple of the Oratoire on the rue de Rivoli. The French government contributed approximately one fifth of the funding. The rest was raised by public subscription. One important donation came from the Catholic pretender to the throne, the comte de Paris, proud to recall his family ties with Coligny. Unveiled in 1889, the monument consisted of the statue of the admiral flanked by figures representing Religion and Country. An inscription at its base emphasized the Admiral's magnanimity in forgiving past wrongs as well as his piety and patriotism: "I will willingly forget all things, whether insults or injuries, that touch only my person . . . provided that those things that touch on the glory of God and the public peace can be safeguarded". Such sentiments did not prevent one reader of a newspaper account of Bersier's inaugural speech from writing "traitor" alongside Bersier's reference to Coligny as a "great Frenchman". In 1905 another statue of Coligny was erected in the Lustgarten of the Berlin Stadtschloss by Kaiser Wilhelm II, also a descendant, with a plaque recalling that the Admiral "fell for his faith" on Saint Bartholomew's Day. A third, smaller Coligny monument would be erected in 1937 through Dutch subscription at the site of the admiral's family seat, Châtillon-sur-Loing, renamed Châtillon-Coligny in 1896. The Dutch royal house of Orange also descended from the Admiral through the marriage of his daughter Louise with William the Silent.

In the twentieth century, the Saint Barthlomew's massacre would recede sharply as a *lieu de mémoire*, as intra-Christian confessional antagonisms declined in intensity, new ideological cleavages made the debate between republicans and monarchists seem

outdated, and much larger mass killings made the event no longer stand out as an illustration of the extremes of human cruelty. Now largely irrelevant to political debate everywhere in Europe except Northern Ireland, its place in the literary imagination also receded, although the cinéaste Patrice Chéreau could still use it to evoke dissipation and violence in the 1994 film version of *La Reine Margot*. Debate about the massacre was now largely confined to academic historians in England, France and Germany, who continued to argue about responsibility for the massacre and the role of the populace in it. Nevertheless, as the twentieth century drew to a close, an episode demonstrated that the massacre remained a sensitive point of memory for organized French Protestantism. When Pope John Paul II unwittingly chose August 24 as the date to close the 1997 World Youth Days in Paris with an open-air mass in the French capital, Protestant spokesmen noted the significance of the date and called on the pope to make the event an occasion for interfaith dialogue about conflicts driven by religious or ethnic intolerance. The archbishop of Paris responded by organizing a "vigil of reconciliation" at the church of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, whose bells are said to have first rung the tocsin for the massacre. The pope's carefully worded message for the gathering described what had happened 425 years previously as "an event of very obscure causes in the political and religious history of France [in which] Christians did things which the Gospel condemns". The uncertainties surrounding the facts of the massacre continued to complicate its memory within the reduced corner of the European political and historical imagination that it still occupied.

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