Le Massacre de Wassy

contribution à *La France vue d'ailleurs*

Philip Benedict

The massacre that took place in the small Champenois town of Wassy on March 1, 1562 has rightly been called "the Sarajevo of the religious wars," since it triggered a sequence of events that rapidly led the outbreak of a conflict of a previously unimagined violence and scope. Yet it was just one of a half dozen massacres that occurred in the troubled six months between November 1561 and April 1562, when new Reformed churches were multiplying with audacity and the crown was struggling to find legal arrangements to keep the situation from getting out of hand. To understand its importance, we must ask not only what happened at Wassy, but also why this particular massacre had such explosive consequences.

What happened at Wassy can be reconstructed with some confidence, for not only were detailed, if selective and partial, accounts rapidly circulated by both sides; a concerned foreign observer eager to get to the bottom of the affair, the Württemberg Lutheran Johannes Brenz, contacted informants on both sides and drew up a report. The careful comparison of these documents yields the following story. Wassy was one of literally hundreds of French localities in which a Reformed church was *dressée* in the year 1561. It was a precarious location for one, since it lay just eleven kilometers from Joinville, the principal residence of the devoutly Catholic matriarch of the Guise clan, Antoinette de Bourbon, and was partly subject to Guise authority. The assemblies that were proliferating in this period were illegal, but by October, when a pastor came from Troyes to oversee the establishment of the church, the enforcement of the law had broken down. Antoinette vainly ordered her tenants not to attend the *prêche* and asked the bishop of Châlons-en-Champagne to visit the burg, only to see him reveal his inability to debate the points of doctrine at issue between the churches and lose still more souls to the upstart faith. Not long thereafter, some bold members of the congregation raided a convent in Saint-Didier, stole its bells, and destroyed a crucifix. Acts of provocation like this against the symbols of the old church were common across France in these months. Elsewhere, where the Huguenots were stronger, priests were driven out and the mass abolished.

While new congregations like that of Wassy proliferated through the summer and fall of 1561, the leaders of the Reformed cause gained increasing influence at court and used the churches' network of synods to coordinate a nationwide petition campaign that culminated in their convincing a slim majority of a special Assembly of Notables to grant them them rights of worship alongside the Roman church. The edict of January 1562 constituted a dramatic rupture of the religious unity that common opinion believed to be essential the country's stability and prosperity. So radical did the idea of allowing two faiths in one kingdom seem that before conceding toleration the regency government led by Catherine de Medici had tried to reunite the two churches by arranging for Theodore Beza, to come to court and address an assembly of prelates at Poissy in the vain hope that they might agree to a shared confession of faith and liturgy. Here, the cardinal of Lorraine positioned himself alongside the moyenneurs by suggesting that the Lutheran confession of Augsburg might provide a basis for compromise. He continued to explore possible avenues of concord between the Gallican church and German Lutheranism over the subsequent months after he and the other leading members of the Guise family left court. In mid-February he and his brother François duke of Guise held a cordial discussion with duke Christopher of Württemberg and his theologians at Saverne during which François assured his German counterpart that he would never harm anybody because of their religious beliefs.

On their way back from Saverne to Joinville, the brothers learned about the edict of January. The extent of the concessions it accorded displeased them, for in their eyes the Huguenots were heretics in a way that the Lutherans were not, since they denied and mocked the Blessed Sacrament. Even worse, they had recurrently disobeyed the kingdom's laws and so deserved punishment for sedition. Two key figures at court, Antoine de Bourbon and the constable Montmorency, also disliked the edict of toleration They pressed to have it modified and urged the duke of Guise to come join them.

During their stay at Joinville, their mother and local Catholic officials from Chaumont and Langres complained of Protestant violations of the law around Wassy and showed the duke an investigative report (*information*) they were compiling to convince the crown to banish the offending Reformed preachers. He agree to support their case. But helping a legal petition advance was one thing; willfully disregarding an important

royal edict, as the Protestants would subsequently accuse the duke of doing, was quite another. Setting out for court with a large suite that included 200 armed horsemen but also his pregnant wife carried on a litter, he showed his concern to avoid an incident in Wassy by deciding not to have his men, many of them openly hostile to Protestantism, pass a night there. As the troop on the road neared the Huguenot-infested burg, however, bells tolled in the town. An arch-Catholic in the duke's suite who knew the region told him that the Huguenots were sounding the chimes they had recently stolen and urged him to end such insolences. He decided on the spot to address the Protestant assembly given his authority over the town and reprimand it for its violations. Men were dispatched ahead to the barn inside the city where between 600 and 1200 people were attending Sunday services. When they arrived to say that the duke wished to speak, the Reformed barred the door. The men sought to force their way in. By the time the duke arrived, a struggle had broken out and stones were being thrown. Several struck the duke. The bulk of his armed men coming up behind needed no further order to attack. They burst into the building, swords flashing and pistols blazing. While it would not have been out of the ordinary in this tense period for a few of those attending the Reformed *prêche* to be armed, most of those inside clearly had no means of defending themselves. The duke had lost control of his men. The violence lasted over an hour before order was restored. Brenz would report that 24 worshippers were killed and another 45 badly wounded, while the duke's men suffered no fatalities and 16 injuries. Published Huguenot accounts speak of 45 to 60 fatalities.

Three and a half months previously, roughly as many Huguenots had been killed in Cahors in a very similar incident where a Catholic crowd invaded and set fire to a house where the Protestants were worshipping. In December, some Paris Reformed fought their way into the church of Saint-Medard when its priests would not stop tolling its bells as they tried to listen to their preacher in a nearby building. Six days after Wassy, a brief siege of several hundred armed Catholic vigilantes who had taken control of Barjols ended in the defeat and slaughter of these men by troops of the king's lieutenant and his Protestant allies. Between March 15 and 18 Huguenots were set upon and killed at Carcassonne and Castelnaudary. All of these episodes testify to the sectarian tensions that had risen to a fever pitch amid the aggressive expansion of the Reformed cause and

the angry reaction it provoked among certain Catholic preachers, who excoriated the crown's willingness to tolerate heresy as a culpable dereliction of duty. All of these episodes aroused demands for a judicial investigation and punishment of the perpetrators.

But the clamor and alarm of the Protestants after Wassy was particularly intense for one simple reason: the presence of Francois de Guise. As the ongoing efforts of the duke and his brother to find common ground with the German Lutherans would suggest, the Guises were far from the most ardent champions of traditional Catholicism among the grandees of the realm. But the Huguenots believed them to be just that. Two years previously, when the Reformed churches had been far fewer and much weaker, and when the intensified repression begun late in the reign of Henri II had continued under his adolescent successor, Protestant publicists led by François Hotman had cast the Guises as bloodthirsty persecutors and dangerous perverters of the kingdom's good order in a series of increasingly shrill manifestos written just before and after the ill-starred conspiracy of Amboise. The demonization of the Guises was essentially dictated by the political logic of the situation in which the Protestants found themselves. During the short reign of François II, the Guises, his relatives by marriage, dominated the court. Not only was it always wisest in a monarchy to blame hated policies on the king's evil counselors; in the immediate political context of 1559-1560, the Huguenot opinion leaders drew upon the uncertainty surrounding the law of succession when the heir was a teenager to depict the Guises' rise to power as the illegitimate usurpation of a place that ought to have gone to the man who appeared at the time to be Protestantism's most effective protector, Anthony of Navarre. The picture of Guise malevolence expressed in these manifestos took hold. Rumors that they were collaborating with the Pope and Philip II in a campaign to exterminate Protestantism circulated in Reformed circles. For those convinced that such rumors were plausible, what happened at Wassy could only seem premeditated. Just three days after the first reports about the event reached Paris, its Reformed church sent a circular letter to the churches elsewhere declaring that the duke's cold-blooded murder of 200 worshippers in Wassy portended a concerted action throughout the realm. "Nous vous prions donc vous tenir prests non seulement pour deffendre vostre Esglise; mais aussi pour secourir celles qui seront les premieres assaillies."

A second development of the preceding months also contributed to the fateful chain of events. Even while pressing for toleration, Beza, Coligny, Condé and the network of Reformed synods had encouraged the churches that had not already created a military unit for protection to do so and to report how many men they could raise. As a result, an integrated system for placing thousands of armed men on alert throughout the kingdom had just been created when the Paris church sent out its circular letter. We do not know how many men the Reformed thought they could raise, but it is clear that Beza and the lawyer Gervais Barbier de Francourt were confident in their military strength when they demanded justice on behalf of the churches for the victims of Wassy. Protestant nobles rallied to the capital to lend support. On March 16, the duke of Guise arrived in Paris and was embraced by the grandees most opposed to the edict of January. On the same day, the Reformed began to go to their services accompanied by their troops. Two armed camps now moved through the city, eyeing one another warily to see which was the strongest. After a tense week, Condé withdrew to Meaux, where Coligny joined him. Both parties of noblemen debated going with arms to Fontainebleau where the king and queen mother were residing to protect the monarch against the hostile intentions they imputed to the other side. Antoine de Navarre and Guise did so. In response, Condé and Coligny rode hard to Orléans, seized that city, sent out orders for a general Protestant mobilization and raised the standard of revolt against what they cast as a hostile seizure of the king's person. Over the next month, the mobilized Protestants took control of roughly a third of the kingdom's largest cities. Civil war was underway.

Fear of a demon they had themselves created thus led the Protestant leaders to see the massacre of Wassy as more threatening than it actually was. Confidence about the numbers of men they could raise encouraged them to have recourse to arms. A chain of decisions taken rapidly under pressure by armed groups amid a climate of anxiety and misperception turned confessional polarization into full-scale civil war.

It would not be the last time in the cycle of violence thus initiated that exaggerated fears induced rash action that in turn generated renewed conflict. The Second Civil War of 1567-1568 broke out after Condé and Coligny wrongly feared that the movement of Spanish troops along France's eastern border betokened an invasion to exterminate the cause and attempted to seize the king at Meaux. The most notorious

bloodbath of the entire civil wars, the Saint Bartholomew's Massacre, was triggered by the fears of the king and his council that the Huguenot nobles aroused by the recent assassination attempt against Coligny were about to launch another similar attack. To forestall it, he and his inner council ordered their summary extra-judicial execution, sparking in turn a wider bloodbath by Catholic militants who believed that the king had finally approved a long overdue extermination of the seditious heretics.

Bibliography

(Titles in descending order of importance for this subject)

Noel Valois, "Vassy", *Annuaire-Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire de France* 50 (1913), p. 189-235.

Stuart Carroll, *Martyrs and Murderers: The Guise Family and the Making of Europe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, ch. 1.

Philip Benedict, "From Polemics to Wars: The Curious Case of the House of Guise and the Outbreak of the French Wars of Religion," *Historein* 6 (2006), p. 97-105.

Philip Benedict and Nicolas Fornerod, "Les 2150 'églises' réformées de France de 1561-1562," *Revue Historique* no. 651 (2009), p. 529-560.