EDITORIAL

The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre: Remembering a Tragedy (I)

PAUL WELLS

This year marks the 450th anniversary of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, which took place in Paris on Thursday, August 24, 1572. What happened in Paris was repeated in the weeks following in towns throughout the kingdom.

It was a tragedy for French Protestantism and a human catastrophe that set the scene for later religious conflicts in Europe. It was the first major blow against the burgeoning Reformed faith in France, heralding the long oppression of the Bourbon monarchs, which lasted until the French Revolution.

The consequences were many and varied. Saint Bartholomew's Day changed the demographic and punctured the hopes of the Reformed in France: from a growing movement, they became an oppressed minority. There were also social and economic consequences not only for France but also for her neighbors.

The 1550s had been a golden age for Protestantism in France marked by spectacular growth.[1] At the start of the decade, there was a handful of Protestants; ten years later, there were over 1,200 congregations and as many

[1] Cf. Pierre Courthial, "The Golden Age of Calvinism in France: 1533–1633," trans. Jonathan Jack, in *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World*, ed. W. Stanford Reid (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 75–92.

as two million adherents. This time was also marked by Geneva-inspired preaching and Bible study influenced by John Calvin, Theodore Beza, Guillaume Farel, and Pierre Viret. The Psalter translated by Clément Marot and Beza had immense popularity; it was the "secret weapon of the Reformation. … The metrical psalm was the perfect vehicle for turning the Protestant message into a mass movement."[2]

The expansion peaked at the Colloquium at Poissy in 1561, where Beza presented the Reformed faith before the young Charles IX and Catherine of Medici, the regent, assembled Catholic ecclesiastics and nobles, and the representatives of the Reformed churches, including Admiral Gaspard de Coligny.[3]

Six months later, in March 1562, the massacre of Protestants at a worship service in a barn at Wassy near Paris by the Duke of Guise and his soldiers was the prelude to eight wars of religion.

Religion was, however, only one focus of these "wars," which were more an ongoing power struggle for the French throne in which the major noble families of the kingdom were involved. The conflict only ended with the Edict of Nantes (April 1598) signed by Henry IV, who had converted to Romanism four years after acceding to the throne in 1589.[4] It is ironic that Henry, the grandfather of the future Sun King, the scourge of the Huguenots, had once been the military leader of the Reformed.

In August 1572, Protestant nobility flocked to Paris for the wedding of Margaret of Valois (the sister of King Charles IX and youngest daughter of Catherine de Medici), and their young champion, Henry of Navarre, son of Jeanne d'Albret and Antoine de Bourbon Navarre.[5] It was hoped that this improbable union would unite a divided France, but it only set the scene for the massacre a week later.

The princes of Condé and Admiral Coligny were the leaders of the Reformed party. In spite of an attempt on his life the day after the wedding, which left him with a wounded hand, Coligny unwisely did not anticipate further trouble. Tragically, he was wrong, the victim of a plot for which Catherine of Medici and the young king must take ultimate responsibility.

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[2] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490–1700* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 307–8.

[3] Henry M. Baird, *Theodore Beza: The Counsellor of the French Reformation, 1519–1605* (1899; repr., New York: Burt Franklin, 1970), chap. 10, gives an account of the proceedings at Poissy.

[4] It is doubtful that Henry ever said "Paris is worth a mass."

[5] Beza had been Henry's tutor at Nérac and was sorely disappointed by his conversion to Catholicism, although he hoped the young David who had become a Saul would turn out to be a Samson.

John Witte sums up the tragedy with finesse:

> In the early morning of August 24, 1572, armed soldiers acting on royal orders, broke into the Paris bedroom of French Calvinist leader, Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, and stabbed him to death. The soldiers heaved his corpse from the window into the courtyard below where a mob was gathering. The mobsters slashed and mutilated the corpse further and then began dragging it, now bereft of head, hands, and genitals, through the streets of Paris. Church bells pealed from the monastery of St. Germain l'Auxerrois signalling the start to a pogrom. On cue, soldiers and a growing mob of Catholic supporters began to break into the homes and shops of Calvinists, slaughtering them and pillaging their goods with growing abandon. Waves of popular violence and savagery broke out in the following weeks not only in Paris but also in several other French cities and towns. Within two months, thousands of French Calvinists had been slaughtered—up to 100,000 according to contemporaries. Untold thousands more were exiled from France or coerced into re-communion with Rome.[6]

Among the dead that day were forty craftsmen, thirty-six nobles, fourteen lawyers, thirteen tradesmen, and five pastors. Another victim was the well-known philosopher Pierre de la Ramée (Ramus).

Survivors had three choices: pack up and flee abroad, take refuge in a Protestant stronghold like La Rochelle, Nîmes, or Montauban, or abjure. Many sadly did the last, either out of fear or in pretense. Five thousand renounced the Protestant faith in Paris within a month. In Rouen, the Huguenot population fell from sixteen thousand in 1565 to three thousand at the end of 1572. In Lyon, Amiens, and Caen, the Protestant population almost halved over the same period.

Rome considered Saint Bartholomew's Day to be a great victory over heresy. The pope had a special *Te Deum* sung at the Vatican and struck a commemorative medal. On the Genevan front, it was feared that the massacre was a prelude to a Europe-wide post-Tridentine pushback against Protestantism.

For the French Reformed, there were several existential consequences of Saint Bartholomew's Day. It expressed the fact that if one were not Catholic, one was a second-class citizen in France. The Protestant nobility were unwelcomed at court, and certain professions were closed to members of "the Pretended Reformed Religion." Mere tolerance was the best one could hope for, because royal authority took the existence of two religions in one

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[6] John Witte, "Rights, Resistance, and Revolution in the Western Tradition: Early Protestant Foundations," *Law and History Review* 26 (September 2008): 69. Cf. Barbara B. Diefendorf, *The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009).

kingdom to mean division.[7] The numerical loss made Protestants into a dispirited minority fighting for survival, limited to certain geographical areas, and with worship strictly controlled; trust in royal clemency was broken; Protestants became a suffering minority faced by an authoritarian church and an absolutist state.

From around 1560 onward, the Protestants had been called "Calvinist," a term apparently coined by a Jesuit; they now came to be known as "Huguenards," which mutated into "Huguenot." No one really knows where the word originated. Its origins are a cause for speculation.[8] The Huguenots themselves did not use it, since it was a slur.

An immediate reaction to the massacre was a flood of pamphlets for freedom of conscience and for the constitutional protection of rights within the legal framework of the state. In addition, several serious theological treatises by the tight-knit monarchomach group, the "Genevan triumvirate" made up of Beza, François Hotman, and Philippe du Plessis-Mornay, advanced biblical and theological arguments for resistance.[9]

The long-term consequences of the massacre are complex and reach further than the immediate shocking human tragedy.[10] They bear on the development of the Catholic south and the Protestant north of modern Europe.[11] Economically, France suffered the loss of some of the most vigorous elements in society, not only trades- and craftspeople but also those involved in scientific enterprises. Where France lost out, her neighbors benefited, not only England, Holland, and Germany but climes further afield. Where the Huguenots went, they took their know-how with them. This impoverishment weakened French society by diminishing diversity, which developed in England and Holland, and reinforcing an autocratic system of tight social control. Protestantism first rebelled against this and

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[7] Cf. Élisabeth Labrousse, *"Une foi, une loi, un roi ?": La Révocation de l'Édit de Nantes*, Histoire et société (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1985).

[8] Geoffrey Treasure, *The Huguenots* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), chap. 12, 410, n. 2. Huguenot may combine the Flemish *huisgenooten* (house fellows) with the German *Eidgenosen* (confederates bound by oath), a word used to describe the "Confederate" faction in Geneva who wanted independence from the Catholic Duke of Savoy and alliance with the Swiss Confederacy. Cf. Janet Glenn Gray, *The French Huguenots: Anatomy of Courage* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 51–54.

[9] We will speak about Reformed resistance theory in the next editorial. "Monarchomach" comes from the Greek *monarchos* (μόναρχος—"sole ruler") and *makhomai* (μάχομαι—"to fight"), meaning those who oppose abusive monarchs. The term seems to have been coined by the Scottish lawyer William Barclay as a term of abuse in *De regno et regali potestate adversus Buchananum, Brutum, Boucherium, et reliquos Monarchomachos, libri sex* (Paris, 1600).

[10] Cf. Louis Monnier, "Causes et conséquences de la Saint-Barthélemy," in *Actes du Colloque l'Amiral de Coligny et son temps, 1972* (Geneva: Droz, 1974), 651–705.

[11] Treasure, *The Huguenots*, chaps. 34, 35.

gave the chance of another way, but later in the Enlightenment, a more insidious opposition arose that would overturn not only the monarchy but also seek to abolish Christianity itself. Through the French Revolution, the revolutionary principle honored by Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky entered into world history, with global consequences.

Finally, the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre had a profound effect on the destiny of Calvin's theology in France. The Reformed faith never regained the foothold in France that it had had in the 1560s. In the following century, the Reformed churches became a minority of little consequence and tended to become introverted, concentrating on maintaining the status quo. Conflicts over questions like Amyraldianism and congregationalism were further reasons for attrition.[12] In the seventeenth century, the enormous kingdom-building hegemony of Louis XIV squeezed the Huguenot minority even further. Enlightenment thinking did the rest in the following century, subjecting the Protestant minority to deism. When, following the Revolution, freedom was regained in the nineteenth century, the revival of Protestantism was undertaken apart from and often in ignorance of the heritage of Calvin's theology. All this explains why Calvinism is generally little known in France today, even in Protestant and evangelical circles.

The Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre was not itself responsible for these consequences. However, it made them possible through the blood-letting by which France lost the finest flower of her sons and daughters.

[12] The condition of the Reformed churches in seventeenth-century France are presented in Martin I. Klauber, ed., *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches: From Henri IV to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014).

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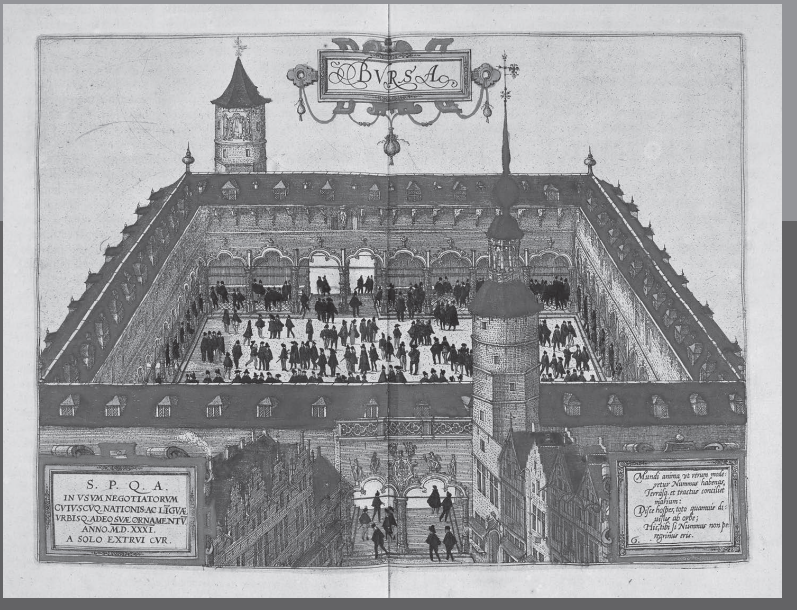

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