

The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre
Christopher N. Schloemer

The Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre was horrific and had far-reaching consequences for France. Thousands of citizens in Paris suffered brutal deaths. What caused this massacre? What were the causes that touched off such a bloody event and what was the result for France? This massacre changed the Reformation and the political and religious climate of France itself. One contributing factor was the spread of Protestantism. The spread of Protestants into France was inevitable, but French Catholics fiercely resisted it.

The Huguenots spread into France for different reasons. France's proximity to Geneva, geographically and linguistically, was a factor in the spread of Protestantism into France—pastors sent from Geneva played a significant role in this process. Additionally, John Calvin himself was from France. He always hoped to see France converted to the “true religion,” even dedicating his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, published in Latin in 1536 and translated into French in 1541, to the French king Francis I.¹ He corresponded with converts in France, welcomed refugees to Geneva, and encouraged the spread of his writings in France. Between 1555 and 1562, at least eighty-eight pastors trained in Geneva tried to organize Calvinist congregations in France.² Even with Henry II terrorizing them they created a network of congregations, and in 1559 held their first synod.³ By 1561, about ten percent of the French population was Huguenot, but about forty percent of the aristocracy had converted. Richard S. Dunn, in his book *The Age of Religious Wars, 1559-1715* states that this is because they saw a chance to gain power from the absolute monarchy.⁴ However, many of these members of the French aristocracy truly believed in the new Protestant move-

ment and took great risks by converting.

Why did they meet so much resistance from the Catholics? From early on, the Catholics perceived the Huguenots as a threat to their community, especially after the “placards affair” in 1534.⁵ On October 18, 1534, a group of French Protestant exiles in Switzerland had organized the printing of placards and had them posted conspicuously throughout Paris and northern France (reportedly even on the door of the king’s bedchamber) so that Catholics would see them on their way to Mass. The placard ridiculed Mass acerbically—so much so that Calvin’s future deputy Theodore Beza even decried it, realizing the negative result it would have, saying “everything was shattered by the indiscreet zeal of a few.”⁶ This was very offensive to French Catholics. To the Catholic community, Mass is “the principal focus of reconciliation and communal satisfaction,” a way to seek forgiveness of sins and redress grievances with neighbors: it is as much a symbol recognizing the bond between members of the community as it is between man and God.⁷ Catholics thought of this attack on the Mass as not just an attack on their theology, but also an attack on their community. This event was one of the “signal events” that underscored the differences between “heterodoxy and heresy...from 1534 on, most French Catholics forever perceived that Protestantism and rebellion went hand in hand.”⁸ A wave of persecution followed this event forcing Calvin into exile in Switzerland. French Catholics even considered the Huguenots a threat to the monarchy.

To many Catholics, the Huguenots not only spread heresy, they were a political threat that “challenged the power and profits of the crown.”⁹ With the conversion of Admiral Gaspard de Coligny of Montmorency and the Bourbon prince of Conde, Huguenots became a political threat. This political bloc wanted an arrangement similar to the Peace of Augsburg created in Germany, with each no-

ble controlling the church in his or her lands. Catherine de Medici tried to mediate a peaceful co-existence, bringing Calvinist and Catholic theologians together in 1561 at the Colloquy of Poissy, but they could not reach an agreement. Although she sought to come to a settlement such as Elizabeth had in England, she could not, as the Catholics and Huguenots in France were not looking for religious toleration—they both thought they were right and that they could win. Catherine did not recognize how antagonistic these sides were to one another and her attempts at reconciliation backfired. Catherine's advances towards the Huguenots actually shocked some fervent Catholics into taking up arms against the Calvinists, increased the power of the anti-Huguenot Guises, and created another political bloc dangerous to the Valois monarchy. The Guises had the loyalty of Paris and the support of the Jesuits, the Pope, and Phillip II of Spain.¹⁰ This pushed Catherine further towards the Huguenots, as she did not want any faction to take power away from the Valois. In 1562, the Duke of Guise ordered his men to kill a congregation of Huguenots worshipping near Vassy, which touched off the French Wars of Religion that lasted from 1562-1570. These wars produced years of inconclusive combat, in which noncombatants suffered more than the armies did, and which produced little result. The wars did however, build religious hatred and animosity, especially in Paris, as damaging psychological effects built up that resulted in tensions that never dissipated—beginning with the first of the early French Wars of Religion.¹¹

During the first French War of Religion that began in 1562, the Catholics became more and more restless, and conflict resulted between civilians as well as armies, especially in Paris. After the military successes of the Huguenots in Tours, Blois, Rouen and other major cities, the largely Catholic population of Paris lived in

dread of an invasion. In May, Catherine took the young king, Charles IX, out of the city. The king, through Catherine, ordered all Protestants to leave Paris, so as not to leave the city vulnerable to Huguenot plots, and the newly formed militia was used to identify Huguenots.¹² There was a growing lawlessness. Catholic residents of Paris killed reputed Huguenots in the streets. “Officials who tried to intervene were themselves in danger, and attempts to legislate an end to the killings met with violent protest.”¹³ In November 1562, the Huguenot army actually did march on Paris. Even as Catherine tried to negotiate a peace after the royal army defeated the Huguenots at Dreux, the Parisians resisted, promising amnesty to those who wanted to convert back to Catholicism and intensifying persecution of religious suspects.¹⁴ Often the city authorities had to arrest people to save them from the wrath of the crowds. In early 1563, Catherine had to station more troops in Paris because local officials were unwilling or unable to control the population. The assassination of the Duke of Guise prompted additional violence among the city’s populace. Finally, Catherine was able to bring the sides together to come up with a compromise peace settlement. This settlement, the Edict of Amboise, was a peace treaty allowing “freedom of conscience” and limited rights to Calvinists and allowed Huguenots to return to their homes—it was highly unpopular with Catholics, especially in Paris. As Huguenots tried to return to Paris in accordance with the treaty, violence continued. Gradually calm returned and the Protestants began to rebuild secretly in the city as the population became more interested in economic crises between 1563 and 1567 caused by a crop failure and the plague.¹⁵ However, the peace was not peaceful.

Neither side was satisfied with the Edict of Amboise. Although Catherine was eager to reach a compromise between the two sides, neither of which could militarily defeat the other, keeping her son’s

kingdom together was an uphill struggle. The Catholics, especially in Paris, did not believe that two Christian denominations should exist. The Huguenots were unhappy about not being able to have a church in Paris. Many provincial parliaments refused to register this edict legalizing Calvinism in France until forced to by the king.¹⁶ For years, it became readily apparent that neither side was enforcing the articles of the edict. Catholics complained about Protestants worshipping in more places than allowed. Protestants argued that Catholics in many areas were not recognizing the tolerance clauses that allowed them to worship. Protestant cells that emerged in overwhelmingly Catholic Paris worsened the existing tensions, creating hostility and confrontation.¹⁷ Indeed, the Huguenots revived their Parisian church underground only six months after the edict dissolved it. They believed that the Edict of Amboise had left a large population of Protestants deprived of the ability to exercise their right to worship as they saw fit. The Huguenots were afraid this would prevent future growth and eventually Protestantism would die out in Paris. In 1565, the Protestants even held an illegal national synod in Paris. As the Protestants began worshipping again, tensions increased and the Catholics became increasingly angry. After a subsequent illegal sermon in the city, placards appeared throughout the city urging people to violence with messages such as “Cut them down...burn them...kill them without a qualm.”¹⁸ In the end, the first French War of Religion had set a pattern in 1562 that would be repeated over and over in the coming decades. Catholics and Protestants fought a military campaign that neither side could win decisively. A peace agreement that the monarchy could not enforce or administer followed the bloodshed.¹⁹ Next, the Protestants broke the peace, leading to the second French War of Religion.

In 1567, Charles IX had used the excuse that the Spanish Duke of Alva was passing near the French border with an army (to quell

religious unrest in the Netherlands), to raise new companies of Swiss guards. The Huguenots decided to strike first. They wanted to intervene before the 6,000 Swiss troops arrived and desired to separate the king from his devout Catholic advisors so they could convince him to reconsider Protestant grievances.²⁰ They gathered near Meaux to seize the king but word leaked out. Charles fled to Paris and all hopes of an amicable settlement were dashed. Charles took this as an attempt on the crown and was not in the mood for compromise. The Huguenots decided to attempt to capture Paris and laid siege. After the attempted kidnapping at Meaux and the siege of Paris, Catholics were ready to believe the worst from the Huguenots—once again, it seemed that Protestantism and rebellion went hand-in-hand.²¹ Convinced that conspirators were inside Paris, they broke into the houses of Huguenots. Most had already left the city, but those found who had stayed behind “suffered arrest, assault, or even death.” One of the key symbols of the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre appeared at this time—“anyone who did not put the sign of a white cross on his hat was in danger of being killed.”²² After a short siege, the king’s troops drove Huguenot army from the capital. Negotiations for peace ensued, but Parisians were not ready for another agreement. They reportedly offered Catherine “great sums of money” to continue the war.²³ They wanted to fight to a clear victory and drive the Huguenots out of France. However, the king made peace again in 1568. Since the Huguenots were in a position of relative strength, the Peace of Longjumeau was favorable to them. It restored the rights of the Edict of Amboise, gave amnesty to Huguenot military leaders and their followers, and the king promised to pay the wages of the Huguenots’ German allies so they would leave the country.²⁴ This uneasy peace did not last long.

Once again, the peace was unpopular with Catholics, especially in Paris, where Catholic priests raged against the treaty and predict-

ed dire consequences for the king if he did not stop supporting these “false prophets.”²⁵ They warned that the Huguenots would destroy France if not exterminated. People sacked Huguenot houses and assaulted any left in the city. Catholics took to heart the message from their priests to drive out the infidel Huguenots. Neither side had disarmed; the third French War of Religion in 1568 was really just a continuation of the second. Although this war had little to do with Paris, Parisians were still fearful of attack, so much so that they had all houses outside of, but close to, the walls of the city torn down.²⁶ City authorities struggled to quell mob violence. Most Huguenots had left Paris at the beginning of the second war, but records of Huguenots arrested during this period show that many were arrested to save them from menacing crowds. One example that shows the hatred of this time is the case of Philippe and Richard de Gastines, arrested in 1569 for performing a Protestant Lord’s Supper in their house.²⁷ Reports state that crowds of people heckled and harassed the magistrates while they judged the case. In the end, the magistrates handed down a sentence of death for the Gastines and for one neighbor; this for a crime that usually resulted in banishment or a fine. After they were hanged, “in an exceptional measure of reprisal,” Catholics leveled the Gastines’ house and erected a monument—a massive stone pyramid with a cross on top, which would become a symbol of religious hatred in Paris.²⁸ This was done to “symbolize their victory over heresy as well as to purify the site where the Catholic mass had been profaned by the Protestant supper.”²⁹ Additionally, the crowd hung Admiral Coligny in effigy. The third French War of Religion finally ended in 1570 with another controversial peace—the Peace of Saint-Germain.

These wars had been trying for French citizens, and the Peace of Saint-Germain only added to the religious tension, leaving both sides “anxious and suspicious.”³⁰ This treaty provided legal frame-

work for Huguenot reintegration into the Catholic-dominated society, granting the right for open Protestant worship inside certain towns (not Paris) for the first time. Catholics and Parisians especially, protested orders to disarm and allow Protestants to return home. The treaty also allowed the Huguenots to legally occupy four fortified towns, which gave them places of refuge and provided them the ability to maintain arms and garrisons of troops.³¹ One edict mandated that “monuments to the persecution of Huguenots were to be demolished and the properties on which the monuments stood returned to their owners.”³² This was especially unpopular in Paris. Parisians refused to take down the cross of Gastines, which had become a symbol of Parisian resistance to coexistence with the Huguenots. To the Catholics, it stood for “their collective commitment to the city, to the crown, and to Christ.”³³ City leaders were under extreme pressure from the citizens of Paris not to move this monument—every time these leaders tried to move it their efforts were undone by protests and clandestine sabotage. Eventually, under direct pressure from the king, city magistrates were able to move the cross in the dead of night under heavy guard to the cemetery of the Holy Innocents. This did not placate the citizens of Paris who sacked the houses of relatives of the Gastines and burned their belongings in the street. Paris was seething in religious tension and riots between Protestants and Catholics resulted in the deaths of as many as fifty people.³⁴ Huguenot rhetoric now became much more anti-royalist—Calvin had said “when kings defy God, they are no longer worthy to be counted as princes...when they raise themselves up against God...it is necessary that they in turn should be laid low.”³⁵ This was an obvious statement to the Huguenots that popular sovereignty was required and alarmed the Catholics. To make matters worse, there were economic pressures.

The French government was deeply in debt. The French Wars

of Religion closely followed the Habsburg-Valois Wars and soldiers required pay. Also, during the war, areas of the countryside had been ravished. Additionally, Catholics had purchased political offices formerly held by Huguenots. The terms of the peace required that these offices be returned to their previous owners. Due to the government's financial woes, these Catholic office holders were not paid when they left their positions.³⁶ Similarly, individuals had paid high prices to lease houses left vacant by fleeing Huguenots. Now, they too had to return these to their previous lessees. These people received little or no compensation from the state, since the treasury was empty.³⁷ So not only had Catholics' pride been hurt by the peace, many had suffered direct financial losses. To many Catholics, the peace seemed to favor the rebels and penalize the king's loyal subjects. Economic issues as well as religious grievances worked to alienate the Catholic-dominated public from their rulers. However, the Huguenots were also frustrated with the edict, as there was really no way to enforce it effectively among a country dominated by Catholic citizens who were convinced that the Huguenots were infidels. These concerns with the edict caused even more resentment by both sides. Catherine wanted to relieve these tensions, but her political actions instead exacerbated them.

Catherine had orchestrated a marriage between the Huguenot Bourbon prince Henri of Navarre (head of the Huguenot party in France) and her daughter, King Charles IX's sister Marguerite, in hopes of strengthening the bonds between the crown and the Huguenots to bring them back into the mainstream of society.³⁸ She hoped to end the Huguenot-Catholic conflict. Catherine had been trying for some time to end this conflict and reach reconciliation through the normal political means of the time. She had already tried to marry one of her other sons, Henry, Duke of Anjou, or Francois, Duke of Alencon, to Queen Elizabeth of England, but the

plans fell through. The marriage of Henry and Marguerite went forward, but this marriage and Catherine's attempts at union with the heretical English, only furthered tensions as French Catholics were already very suspicious of Huguenot power in the court. Many prominent Huguenots attended the wedding, the most prominent of which was Coligny. His attendance only five years after his effort to kidnap the king also increased tensions.³⁹ It was also a rash move by Coligny; he still had a reward of 50,000 *écus* on his head. However, Coligny had been readmitted to the king's council and given a pension—it seemed to the Catholics that the king had restored a traitorous rebel to a position of political influence, and it was widely assumed that the cross of Gastines had been removed through his influence. Adding to the angst of the Catholics were the efforts of many Huguenots to send military aid to Dutch rebels and news that a Protestant army was en route to the Netherlands.⁴⁰ Catholics saw this wedding as just one more affront. Henri and Marguerite were married on August 18, 1572.⁴¹ However, instead of reconciliation, an explosion of extreme religious violence soon rocked Paris, and ultimately France.

To many French Catholics, the thought of this marriage between Huguenot and Catholic royalty was very unpopular. It was also unpopular with the clergy. Catholic priests railed against this “perverse union.”⁴² One source described a nun or lay sister going around Paris before the wedding telling people that God had sent her to tell the people that the city would be destroyed if they did not kill all of the Huguenots. This tension boiled over after the wedding. On 22 August 1572, four days after the wedding, an assassination attempt was made by sieur de Maurevert on Coligny (through a window of a house owned by the Guise family) near Coligny's lodgings.⁴³ Coligny had stayed in Paris after the wedding to present petitions to the king on violations of the Peace of Saint Germain and

was returning from a meeting with the king. Maurevert only wounded Coligny, but city officials feared a riot and took precautions, posting guardsmen at the gates of the city. Soon rumors began to fly that Protestants were demanding revenge for this attempt. The people of Paris, already angry about the wedding, were also now fearful. It is significant that Coligny survived. Had he died, the Huguenot leaders would have fled Paris and tried to raise forces to renew the civil wars. However, the Huguenot leaders reluctantly decided to stay, trusting in royal assurances of protection. They furiously protested the attempt on Coligny's life, and some did rashly speak of revenge, playing right into the fears of the king. Although historians disagree on who was responsible for what happened next, sometime on August 23, a meeting was called to discuss the escalating tensions. Coligny's brother-in-law, Teligny, had an army of about four thousand troops stationed outside the capital, and many feared a strike against the Guises, the Catholic population of the city, or even on the king.⁴⁴ No matter who came up with the plan, the council decided that a preemptive strike was the safest thing to do and Catherine and the king finally agreed. They concluded that civil war was now inevitable, and by killing the Huguenot leaders, they would not have to face them in the field.⁴⁵ On Sunday, 24 August 1572 (The feast of St. Bartholomew), royal Swiss guards were detailed to kill the Huguenot leaders.⁴⁶ The king ordered the city militia out to guard the streets while the murders took place.⁴⁷ This spark set off the massacre.

In the early hours of that fateful Sunday morning, Henry, duke of Guise, led the Swiss guards on their mission. The duke personally killed Coligny in revenge for the murder of his father.⁴⁸ Other Huguenot leaders died in the attack. The bridegroom Henri of Navarre was trapped at Court, and was only spared by converting to Catholicism—he was under house arrest for five years afterwards.⁴⁹ How-

ever, the killing did not end with the Huguenot leaders. The noise and commotion of these murders unleashed a wave of violence in Paris. According to a witness, after Coligny's death, one of the murderers, (some say the duke himself) upon leaving the house with his followers, said—"Cheer up, my friends! Let us do thoroughly that which we have begun. The king commands it." The witness stated the words "the king commands it" were repeated over and over, and soon "on every side arose the cry, 'To arms!'"⁵⁰ This was very significant, because many now believed it was the king's command to kill the Huguenots. These words "transformed private passions into private duty."⁵¹ Not only were the Catholics taking out their hatred on the Huguenots, they were doing it at the command of their king, or so they believed. Once this rumor began, it was almost impossible to stop, even though the king and even the duke of Guise tried to stop the violence and the duke actually gave refuge to some Huguenots.⁵² The Catholic majority also acted upon the exhortations of their religious leaders, who, instead of quelling the tensions, encouraged violence by "describing the extermination of heresy as a necessary purging of the social body."⁵³ Fiery sermons of Catholic priests in Paris acted as a stimulus to violence against the Huguenots. The massacre lasted for almost a week, with civilians committing most of the murders. Although pillage and looting occurred, evidencing that economic motives were at work, the killings were mostly motivated by religious hatred. The fact that the Huguenots involved in the removal of the cross of Gastines were among the very first victims of the massacre supports this.⁵⁴ Often Catholics offered Huguenots a stark choice – they could convert, recite Catholic prayers, go to Mass, or die if they refused. Catholics not only killed Huguenots, they "humiliated, dishonored, and shamed [them] as the inhuman beasts they were perceived to be."⁵⁵ Their oppressors took "special cruelties" against pregnant Huguenots and

their unborn babies. Catholics ritually murdered, dismembered, or drowned Huguenots in the Seine River.⁵⁶ Catholics purified places the heretics had “profaned” by burning many houses. Later pamphlets also show that these killings were not only believed to be condoned by the king, Catholics believed they were executing the will of God—many “blood-splattered priests” affirmed that notion on the spot.⁵⁷ The massacre was “a terrible act of faith on the part of an impassioned populace that believed itself to be executing the will of God.”⁵⁸ Over two thousand Huguenots died in Paris during this massacre. The massacre in France was not confined to the capital though.

As word of the massacre in Paris spread, over the next weeks the bloodshed spread to other provinces in France. Populations of other Catholic-dominated cities joined their capital in similar brutal ritualized killings—cleansing the Huguenots from their populations as well. In some cases, Catholics carried out the killings “to the accompaniment of minstrels and musicians.”⁵⁹ Often, authorities put the Protestants into protective custody, only to see Catholic mobs storm the prisons, haul out the prisoners, and kill them in the streets. Some three thousand Huguenots died outside of Paris.⁶⁰ This massacre affected the Huguenot community immensely.

The Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre had a huge impact on the Protestant population of France. By October, 1572, most of the main Huguenot leaders were dead.⁶¹ Huguenot communities never again felt the confidence that had led to their great expansion over the previous ten years. This was especially true in the north where the Guises were able to eliminate many of the inroads the Huguenots had made in the 1560s.⁶² Even in the south, Huguenots were on the defensive. Studies of baptismal registries in Rouen show that after the massacre, far fewer babies were given names from the Old Testament. These types of names would “mark them as Protestants

as they grew up and make them vulnerable.”⁶³ Thousands of Huguenots who survived the massacre were re-baptized into the Catholic faith, abjuring Protestantism. It seemed to many that not only had the king turned against them—God had also turned on them. A Calvinist minister, Hughues Sureau, converted back to Catholicism because he said the massacres were a sign that God was against the Protestant movement.⁶⁴ Even in towns where there were no killings, Protestants defected. Many others simply left the country for cities such as Geneva or London, where they could keep their faith without fear.⁶⁵ However, the massacre did not just affect the Huguenots.

The St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre made religious tension and hatred even worse in France. Huguenot and Catholic towns banded together as states-within-states, especially in the largely Huguenot south.⁶⁶ Governors of some provinces became almost independent local rulers, ignoring the central government and allying themselves with whichever religious faction was convenient. The Huguenots did fight back, as they still had support from much of the French nobility and still had military strength, so they could not be eliminated. However, the movement had changed them. Instead of seeking compromise, Protestants were now openly against the monarchy. Politically, they called for popular sovereignty. They refused to submit to royal authority, and the king was not strong enough to enforce his authority. Warfare continued over the next quarter century or so as the French monarchy tried to find a solution to accommodate the Huguenots and militant Catholics.⁶⁷

Why did this violent massacre occur? Why did the royal political machinations exacerbate rather than eliminate the tension? The massacre happened for many reasons, one of which was that Catherine and the royal leaders did not recognize just how volatile the situation was. Politicians of this time were used to “courtly power games in which the threat and the bluff and ultimately the negotiat-

ed compromise were used by all parties to advantage.”⁶⁸ Royal policy had vacillated during the second half of the sixteenth century. No reformation was driven from above (as in England) because no French king embraced it, but efforts to repress it were not successful because there were so many Protestants in the kingdom; that and largely ineffective monarchs contributed greatly to the French Wars of Religion. At times, Catherine cooperated with both the Huguenots and the Catholics, depending on how she perceived she could compromise and keep Valois power on the throne. Besides, Catherine’s plan was not so different from Elizabeth’s plan that had worked in England.⁶⁹ The problem was that Catherine was dealing with a different situation and did not understand the depth of the rift between the Catholics and the Huguenots. There were deep social issues at hand.

The Catholics and the Huguenots had their own versions of an ordered society and each was a threat to the other. It was as much a clash of cultures as it was a clash of religions. One large part of the French Catholic culture was in the religious nature of the crown. The coronation of a new king in France was steeped in religious significance—patterned after Charlemagne’s crowning by the Pope in Rome in 800. The coronation took place in the cathedral church in Reims and the Archbishop of Reims performed the ceremony. This ceremony melded together the king and the church—the king was not only defender of the country, but also defender of the Catholicism in France. During the ceremony, the king was explicitly charged with defending the church from heresy.⁷⁰ There was no separation of church and state in France. Because of this, the Protestant vision of church and state was incompatible with the vision of most French people—any attack on the Catholic Church was seen as an attack on the authority of the king. The Gallic principle of “one faith, one king, one law” was strong in France.⁷¹ Either

the monarchy or the reformed religion would have to modify its very essence to coexist. Catholics perceived Catherine's efforts at compromise as traitorous. They felt vindicated when the king had done his duty as protector of the faith and ordered the extermination of the Huguenots. Both Catholics and the Huguenots considered Christianity to be a body of believers instead of a body of beliefs, which made social discipline much more important. This was evident in Calvin's work. These differences led to atrocities on both sides. Although Huguenots decried the massacre, they forgot that Huguenot mobs had at times murdered Catholics without mercy and tortured priests, nuns, and monks in imitation of the *Inquisition*.⁷² The Catholics and the Huguenots both thought that they could not compromise and remain true to their faith and their community of believers. They also each thought they were right and would prevail in the end. This made Catherine's attempt at political balance impossible. Radical Catholic priests also had a role in the massacres.

Priests such as Rene Benoist, Pierre Dyvole, and above all Simon Vigor, inflamed the passions of the Catholics in Paris.⁷³ They often used Old Testament scenes, where God "animated the people to kill the false prophets without sparing a single one, thereby teaching us how grievously and without mercy the obstinate heretics should be punished and exterminated." They urged their congregations to follow Moses' instructions and "buckle on their swords, go from house to house, and 'each one of you kill his brother, his friend, and his kin.'"⁷⁴ One pamphlet urged Catholics to "spill your blood for God, even to the last drop."⁷⁵ Parisian Catholics fueled by these sermons were eager to believe that the king had ordered the extermination of the Huguenot heretics. They believed they were doing the will of God and king. This made the popular violence "much more coherent and plausible, if no less grisly."⁷⁶

The Catholic population in the capital city of Paris had a huge role throughout this time of religious warfare, in these conflicts, and ultimately, the massacres. As seen before, the Catholic citizens of Paris were very resistant to any reconciliation. They helped bring on the first French War of Religion with their reaction to the massacre at Vassy and interfered with the queen's efforts to negotiate a truce at several points in the war. They delayed and undermined peace by refusing to disarm and refusing to allow the Huguenots to return. They acted similarly during the second and third French Wars of Religion, as shown by the Cross of Gastines riots, and when they fought city officials' efforts to put the treaty into effect. Additionally, they had a strong impact on the king. The city was one of the major sources of funding for the crown in its efforts to conduct these religious wars, and they reportedly offered money to the queen to continue the third French War of Religion.⁷⁷ Finally, their intolerance and extreme anger culminated in their violent reaction to the killing of the Huguenot leaders and the resulting massacre, which hardened the resolve of both sides. Afterwards, the Parisians were proud of what they did.

The Catholic citizens of Paris believed they were in the right. Many Parisians interpreted the sudden blossoming of a long-dormant hawthorn tree in the Cemetery of the Innocents as a visible sign of approval from God. Pious Catholics gathered in front of the tree to pray and touch the tree with relics, even bringing their sick to view the tree to be healed.⁷⁸ On September 4, 1572, Charles IX ordered a solemn procession of the relics of Saint Genevieve to "give thanks to God for the Huguenot defeat." The king and his brothers participated in the procession. Although Charles had accepted responsibility for the massacre, he portrayed his role as "the executor of the divine command to rid the kingdom of the pollution of heresy."⁷⁹ Catholics around Europe concurred that the Parisian Catho-

lics were right in their efforts to rid the city of Huguenots. When the Pope heard of the massacre, he ordered a “*Te Deum*” chanted, had a commemorative medallion struck, and had frescoes painted at the Vatican showing angels approving the massacre. Catholic princes throughout Europe sent congratulations to the king and Catherine.⁸⁰ However, at the end of the religious wars, although France stayed a Catholic country with a Catholic king, the Huguenots remained legally entrenched with “perpetual and irrevocable” rights.⁸¹

The Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre was a terrible event in history. Thousands of people were massacred for their religious beliefs. One causal factor was the spread of Protestantism into France through France’s close geographic and linguistic proximity to Geneva and the efforts of John Calvin to spread Protestantism there. Catholics saw the Huguenots as a threat to their way of life and their political system. They had much difficulty peacefully coexisting socially and politically—especially in the capital city of Paris. The first three French Wars of Religion and their peace resolutions were unpalatable to both the Catholic and Huguenot citizens. The citizens of Paris vehemently and violently reacted. The attempts of Catherine De Medici to facilitate a political compromise to a religious conflict were unacceptable to the Catholics, and the violent events of the attempted assassination of Coligny led to the decision to kill the Huguenot leadership. This act sparked the massacre in Paris which killed over two thousand Huguenots in the city, mostly by rioting citizens who believed they acted on behalf of their king and their God. The massacre was repeated throughout France and changed the political and religious climate in France itself, destroying much of the power of the Huguenot movement, which was never the same, and at the same time hardening their stance towards the crown and creating more hatred and tension. Normal royal political intrigues did not work in a situation in which the conflicting sides

were so opposed religiously and socially that they could not compromise. These attempts only made the matter worse as tensions were raised by passionate proselytizing. Catholic priests also drove Catholics to a frenzy of hatred. The king justified his acts as his duty to God and Catholic rulers outside France celebrated the grisly massacres.

The spread of Protestants into France was inevitable, but met with much resistance. The French Wars of Religion were different to the people of Paris, and France in general, than other wars such as the Habsburg-Valois wars. The French Wars of Religion not only affected the French in material ways, such as higher taxes and economic ruin. They threatened the very substance of the way their society was built—in their relationships with others and with God. To the Catholics and the Huguenots, these wars were not about theological differences—they were “crucial choices between truth and error, between salvation and damnation, between God’s favor and his impending wrath.”⁸² Although Catherine De Medici, the king, and the political parties involved may have seen this as another conflict that could be resolved by normal political means, the people of France had a different perception, and their rulers’ inability to understand this led to a violent tragedy.

Notes

¹ Barbara B. Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris*, (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc. 1991), 119.

² Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629*. 2d ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2005), 26.

³ Richard S. Dunn, *The Age of Religious Wars, 1559-1715*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1970), 32.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷ Holt, *French Wars*, 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹ Dunn, *The Age of Religious Wars*, 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

- ¹¹ Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 64.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 65.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 66.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 66-67.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.
- ¹⁶ Holt, *French Wars*, 57.
- ¹⁷ Mack P. Holt, "Putting Religion Back into the Wars of Religion," *French Historical Studies* 18, no.2, (1993), 539.
- ¹⁸ Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 78.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 79-80.
- ²¹ Holt, *French Wars*, 65.
- ²² Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 80-81.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 82.
- ²⁴ Holt, *French Wars*, 65.
- ²⁵ Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 82.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.
- ²⁷ Holt, *French Wars*, 79.
- ²⁸ Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 83-84.
- ²⁹ Holt, *French Wars*, 79.
- ³⁰ Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 80.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 71.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 84.
- ³³ Holt, "Putting Religion Back", 539.
- ³⁴ Holt, *French Wars*, 80.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ³⁶ Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 90.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ Holt, *French Wars*, 76.
- ³⁹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: A History*, (New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc. 2004), 338.
- ⁴⁰ Cathal J. Nolan, *The Age of Wars of Religion, 1000-1650: An Encyclopedia of Global Warfare and Civilization, Vol. 2.* (Westport: Greenwood Press 2006), 807.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴² Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 91.
- ⁴³ Holt, *French Wars*, 82.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 83-84.
- ⁴⁵ Nolan, *The Age of Wars of Religion*, 807.
- ⁴⁶ Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 96.
- ⁴⁷ Holt, *French Wars*, 85.
- ⁴⁸ Dunn, *The Age of Religious Wars*, 35.
- ⁴⁹ MacCulloch, *Reformation: A History*, 338.
- ⁵⁰ De Thou, *Histoire des choses arrivees de son temps*, (Paris, 1659), 658 sqq, in J.H. Robinson, 2 vols. (Boston: Ginn, 1906), 2: n.p.
- ⁵¹ Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 99.
- ⁵² Holt "Putting Religion Back", 540.
- ⁵³ Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 105.

- ⁵⁴ Holt “Putting Religion Back”, 540.
- ⁵⁵ Holt, *French Wars*, 87.
- ⁵⁶ Nolan, *The Age of Wars of Religion*, 808.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁸ Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 177.
- ⁵⁹ Nolan, *The Age of Wars of Religion*, 808.
- ⁶⁰ Holt, *French Wars*, 95.
- ⁶¹ Nolan, *The Age of Wars of Religion*, 809.
- ⁶² MacCulloch, *Reformation: A History*, 339.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁴ Holt, *French Wars*, 95.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 95-96.
- ⁶⁶ Cameron, Euan, *Early Modern Europe, An Oxford History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc. 1999), 128.
- ⁶⁷ MacCulloch, *Reformation: A History*, 339.
- ⁶⁸ Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 180.
- ⁶⁹ Dunn, *The Age of Religious Wars*, 35.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 2-8.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 198.
- ⁷² Nolan, *The Age of Wars of Religion*, 809.
- ⁷³ Holt, “Putting Religion Back”, 541.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁵ Holt, *French Wars*, 75.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁷ Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 179.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 176.
- ⁸⁰ Nolan, *The Age of Wars of Religion*, 809.
- ⁸¹ Dunn, *The Age of Religious Wars*, 40.
- ⁸² Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 178.

Bibliography

- Cameron, Euan, ed. *Early Modern Europe, An Oxford History*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc. 1999.
- De Thou, *Histoire des choses arrivees de son temps*, (Paris, 1659), in J.H. Robinson, 2 vols. (Boston: Ginn, 1906), 2:180-183. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1572stbarts.html>
- Diefendorf, Barbara B. *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc. 1991.
- Dunn, Richard S. *The Age of Religious Wars, 1559-1715*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1970.
- Holt, Mack P. “Putting Religion Back into the Wars of Religion,” *French Historical Studies* 18, no.2, (1993): 524-551.

_____. *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629*. 2d ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2005.

MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Reformation: A History*. New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc. 2004.

Nolan, Cathal J. *The Age of Wars of Religion, 1000-1650: An Encyclopedia of Global Warfare and Civilization, Vol. 2*. Westport: Greenwood Press. 2006.

Chris Schloemer holds a Master's Degree in History with a concentration in Ancient and Classical History, as well as a Master's Certificate in American History, both from American Military University. He has also earned a Master's Degree in Management from Wayland Baptist University. Retiring from the Air Force after more than 25 years of service, Chris still works in human resource management for the Air Force, but hopes to become a history teacher at the college level someday. Chris lives in San Antonio with his wife, son, and daughter and enjoys spending time with his family; his mother and other two sons also live in San Antonio, as well as two of his six grandchildren. He also enjoys playing bad golf and keeping his yard beautiful.