

VIOLENCE IN THE FRENCH WARS OF RELIGION

Posted on December 1, 2020 by Philippe Conrad



For no less than thirty-six years, from 1562 to 1598, the kingdom of France was the scene of eight wars of religion - in reality, conflicts that were just as political as religious. These wars comprised those who opposed the "[Huguenots](#)," those who supported the Reformation, and those who defended the traditional Catholic faith. The Reformed message, in its predominantly Calvinist but also Lutheran version, spread rapidly, from 1555, first in the towns and then among the nobility, and especially in the southern part of France, but also in Normandy.

Once peace returned in 1598, the demographic, political and economic toll was heavy: the monarchy was in enormous debt and the country was considerably impoverished. It is estimated that the population of the kingdom had fallen from 17 to 16 million inhabitants. But in this deficit, it is not known what was the share of actions of violence and war, famines, plague and harsh climatic conditions.

After the decades of the "beautiful 16th century" corresponding to the reigns of Francis I and Henry II, the kingdom of Valois fell for nearly forty years into the throes of what historians of the 19th century came to designate as the time of "Wars of Religion" - an era of iron and blood which saw France torn between supporters of the Calvinist Reformation and defenders of the traditional Catholic faith. They would clash in eight civil wars interspersed with fragile truces that were regularly called into question.

These were wars with complex origins that mixed religious and political issues, nobiliary rivalries and popular violence, all in an international context which remained dominated by the antagonism between the monarchy of the [Valois](#) and the [Empire of the Habsburgs](#), at a time when European Christianity had also to contend with the Ottoman threat.

These civil wars saw the outburst of extreme violence that collective memory has come to identify with one event known as the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre (1572), which cannot, however, account on its own for the magnitude of this outburst. Violence generally attributed to Catholics seeking to maintain religious unity of the kingdom and therefore hostile to freedom of conscience; the weakness of the last Valois rulers; the intrigues of the queen mother and regent, [Catherine de Medici](#); the ambitions of the Guises; and the "fanaticism" of the Catholic League - all have long imposed the idea that the Protestants were the victims of "intolerance," which then generated the violence.

Rather than looking for those responsible for this violence within royal power which, it appears, frequently sought conciliation, or within the rival ambitions of the great nobiliary families and their

respective clients – instead, the historians of today, familiar with the study of mentalities, insist more, as historian [Jean-Marie Constant](#) explains to us, on “religious sensibilities, on Catholic and Protestant violence because of systems of representation, and these imaginary phantoms carrying such irrational intransigence that they precipitated the populations one against the other.” This is how, in his [Guerriers de Dieu](#), Denis Crouzet deciphered the nature of the imaginary phantoms, which then commanded violence, thus profoundly renewing the approach that we had until then of the great politico-religious divide that France experienced, from 1562 to 1598, from the brawl of Wassy to the promulgation of the Edict of Nantes.

It should first of all be remembered, unlike an overly Manichean reading of the period, that violence was widely shared and that massacres and cruelties were carried out by both sides, with the strictly religious factor hardly being the sole cause or reason. In addition to the impossible peaceful coexistence of the two rival confessions of faith, it should in fact be emphasized that the conspiracy of Amboise of 1560 (a failed Protestant attempt to seize the person of [King Francis II](#)), the repeated attacks of the Huguenots, the [surprise of Meaux](#) in 1567 (Protestants' attempt to kidnap [King Charles IX](#)), or the devastating campaigns led by [Coligny](#) (leader of the Huguenots) in the South were all perceived as challenges to royal authority. As for the cruelties that punctuated the confrontation between the two sides, they were widely shared, as shown by [Ronsard](#) – a man of a third party which hoped for reconciliation – in his [Discours des misères de ce temps](#) (*Discourse on the Miseries of these Times*), he strongly condemns

*These new Christians who have pillaged, plundered France,
Stolen, murdered, despoiling all by virulence,
Beat down the body by blows a hundred thousand
As if it were a virtue to be a brigand,
Living sans chastity, and to hear them declaim,
It's God who leads them, when simply they laugh at Him.
And then what? Burn houses, plunder and brigandage -
This is what all of you now call the Reformed Church?*

The explosion of violence which occurred after the 1560s, echoes the continuous progress of the Reformation and the failure of the attempts to eradicate it implemented by [Henry II](#), who accidentally disappeared in 1559. The concessions made by the regent Catherine de Medici were not enough to calm the impatience of the Protestants, who were perceived as dangerous heretics by the Catholic

masses worried about their salvation, in a time of eschatological expectation which generated extreme anxiety.

The will of the Protestant minority to assert itself openly, and the growing visibility of a faith perceived as rival and dangerous, exasperated the Catholic people, who were infuriated by the arrogance and contempt the new faith inspired among the adherents of the cause of Geneva. But we must also take into consideration the recent availability of the warrior-class, deprived - since the conclusion in 1559 of the [Treaty of Cateau-Cambr sis](#) which put an end to the Italian mirage of the Valois - of the glories that the campaigns carried out for half a century beyond the Alps, once assured them. The entirety of the [Nobles of the Sword](#) was now available for the violence that was to unfold within the realm. Murders, massacres and vendettas, therefore, under these new conditions, continued for nearly four decades, until the peacemaking and restorative reign of Henry of Navarre, who became Henry IV.

Violence took on new forms during this period. In addition to the pitched battles between opposing armies, in the traditional manner - in [Dreux](#), [Jarnac](#), [Moncontour](#), [Coutras](#) or [Ivry](#) - it now becomes necessary to speak of the common practice of the sacking of towns controlled by the enemy, general massacres targeting the places or the regions supposed to be won over to the opposing side, popular "emotions" which threw the supporters of one confession against their neighbors attached to the opposite faith.

Violence no longer concerned soldiers alone; it affected all strata of society and even broke free from the chivalrous rules which until then governed the conduct of war. Non-combatant populations were no longer spared, especially women and children, and, churchmen, Protestant pastors or Catholic clerics, were even specially targeted. The code of honor, which once ritualized the exercise of violence, and was imposed in particular to spare the wounded, appeared largely to be forgotten.

The new characteristics which the fighting then took on were revealed in the first "wars of religion". On March 1, 1562 in [Vassy](#), in Champagne, the men of the [Duke of Guise](#) confronted Protestants celebrating their worship inside the village, which was not permitted by the January edict which only authorized it outside the city walls.

The initial quarrel degenerated into a generalized brawl and the Catholic soldiers of Fran ois de Guise massacred their opponents, leaving about twenty to fifty dead on the ground, including five women and a child, and one hundred and fifty wounded. The event aroused immense emotion among

Reformers and Catholics alike and, according to Protestants, started the civil war, the first act of which was identified by Catholics with the attack launched by Condé on Orleans a month later.

The conflict immediately reached unprecedented levels of violence and signified the abandonment of the chivalrous ideal still embodied by Bayard (1475-1524) under the reign of Francis I, a model by which the nobility of the time had long been recognized. A Huguenot gentleman, [François de la Noue](#), author of *[Discours politiques et militaires](#)*, published in 1587, lamented the loss of the principles which every good captain should obey.

Certainly, several great leaders whom he worked with, in particular the Duke of Guise, were able to show both magnanimity and bravery, which earned the author - after the defeat suffered by the Protestants at Moncontour - to be spared by the Duke of Anjou, the future [Henry III](#). François de la Noue insisted on the fact that "such beautiful acts should not be buried in forgetfulness, so that those who make profession of arms shy away from imitating them and move away from cruelties and unworthy things, where so many let themselves go in these civil wars, so as not to know or want to curb their hatreds." A wish that says a lot about the reality of the times and the primacy given to "the spirit of revenge," the desire for revenge most often overriding the demands of honor and virtue so dear to the nobility as a whole.

Thus it was that prisoners were routinely killed, for they are too numerous to be kept and maintained by the victors, and the low social status of the greatest number denied any hope of ransom. It should also be considered, in these times of religious mobilization, that this also ensured these same prisoners would not again be fighting the present winner in the future. For [Blaise de Monluc](#), one of the most famous Catholic captains, "There was no mention of prisoners at that time" because "we had to come to austerity and cruelty." In this case, the concern to obtain legitimate revenge for the losses suffered by his own side was added to the conviction that to get rid of the adversary was part of a process of militant piety in the service of true faith threatened by heretics.

Merciless for the foot-soldiers, the war also did not spare the most prestigious leaders, who were no longer protected from ignominious death. Several of them were coldly murdered on the battlefield. In Dreux, in December 1562, the Marshal of France, [Jacques d'Albon de Saint-André](#), taken prisoner, was killed, shot in the head by the Protestant Jean Perdiel de Bobigny, a former servant of the Marshal, who had condemned de Bobigny a few years earlier.

In February 1563, outside Orléans, Duke Francis of Guise - the defender of [Metz](#), the victor of [Calais](#), one of the best warriors of his time - was treacherously shot down by the Protestant [Poltrot de Méré](#), a relative of whose had been one of the victims of the repression that occurred in 1560, during the [conspiracy of Amboise](#).

In 1569, [Louis of Condé](#), the leader of the Protestant side, was killed by a Gascon captain by the name of Montesquiou when, wounded, Louis had surrendered, after a fall from his horse, in exchange for two officers of the Catholic army. His body was then carried on the back of a donkey to the nearby town where, leaning against a church pillar, it was desecrated by the Catholic crowd. By getting rid of enemy leaders in this way, some people thought they were finishing off the other side, according to La Noue "by way of the body they sought to cut off the head."

Often, private vendettas came to mingle with confessional antagonisms, exacerbating, according to the historian [Olivia Carpi](#), "The strong propensity of the nobles to seek justice through bloodshed, for offenses they or members of their family had suffered... This, within a nobility that the sovereign could no longer control, as in the past, because of his inexperience and financial difficulties that led to the reduction of his liberality; the civil conflict subverted all the rules, to the point that some no longer distinguished between a legitimate act of war and the expression of private violence, between vendetta and the service of a public cause."

The authors of the time, La Noue or [Agrippa d'Aubigné](#) - who left us [Histoire universelle](#), giving an account of the wars, in which he had been a participant - stressed the barbarism shown by the soldiery towards defenseless populations, the main victims of the troubled times. Providing for the needs of armies on the march was a most severe test from the start, with the looting, destruction and rape that this implied. These crimes were tolerated by leaders who saw them as a reward for their troops and a sure way to terrorize populations believed to be unlikely to come to terms with the enemy if the fortunes of arms turned.

The practice of "spoiling," or scorched earth, was thus established as a legitimate means of deterring any attempt at resistance with terror. To keep [Guyenne](#) for the king, the [lord of Monluc](#) did not hesitate to hang all Protestants suspected of defying monarchical authority. This encouraged, because of the terror inspired by such measures, subsequent surrenders.

The sacking of conquered towns and villages also allowed the leaders to retain troops who might

otherwise be tempted, during long and exhausting campaigns, to desert or mutiny. [Baron des Adrets](#) (a loyal supporter of Protestant troops who later joined the Catholics in 1564) thus believed that "if we do not want to see the troops slip away from behind in good measure, we must take away from them the hope of any forgiveness so that they seek no refuge but in the shadow of the flags, no life except in victory." The same war-leader also affirmed that "the only way to put an end to the barbarities of the enemies is to pay them back with revenge... because no one practices cruelty by returning it."

We then see to what degree of unprecedented violence such a vision of war could lead. Thus, although life had been promised to them during their surrender, the Protestant defenders of [Orange](#) (commune of Vaucluse) were all killed after their surrender when the city was recaptured by the Catholics, which also brought many atrocities inflicted on "civilians," who were burned alive, impaled, cut into pieces, while women and girls were raped and young children smashed against the walls. Applying the law of retaliation, which he had made his code of conduct, Baron des Adrets encouraged his Protestant troops to behave in the same way when they seized [Pierrelatte](#), [Pont Saint Esprit](#) and [Bollène](#).

We know that the apex of violence was reached during the night of August 24, 1572, during the [Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre](#). Historians have distinguished the operation aimed at neutralizing the Protestant nobility - gathered in Paris for the marriage of [Henry of Navarre](#) and [Marguerite de Valois](#) and mobilized by the failed attack against Coligny - from the anti-protestant pogrom which was undertaken, beyond all control, by the Parisian Catholic mob - and all in the context of eschatological expectation, finely analyzed by Denis Crouzet.

The Parisian event had aftershocks in the provinces; and this dramatic episode largely contributed to the victimization of the Reformed minority. But it should be remembered here that the [Michelade of Nîmes](#) in 1567, which saw dozens of notable Catholics thrown into wells, was five years prior to the Paris massacre.

Huguenot violence was also expressed, during these terrible years, in the form of large-scale iconoclasm, heralding the "vandalism" denounced by Father Gregory during the Revolution. The destruction of images, the sacking of shrines, the looting of church treasures, or the desecration of relics could only arouse legitimate anger on the Catholic side, bringing about a fierce desire for revenge.

It was the same with the massacre of clerics ordered by Protestant leaders. From July 1562, ten years

before the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, the parish priest of [Saint Paterne d'Orléans](#) was executed in front of all the Huguenot leaders. The same year, during the capture of [Pithiviers](#), the Catholic fighters were spared against an oath not to fight the Reformers any more, but all the clerics were killed. I

n the South and in Normandy, similar decisions cost the lives of many priests and monks. The most terrifying case is that of a Franciscan monk from [Mâcon](#) who was taken, rope around his neck, around the city in a sinister route, punctuated by mutilating stations. His ears, fingers and nose were cut off one-at-a-time, his feet were burnt, and he was not finished off until he was castrated. Even during truces, priests were forced, in many regions, to go underground to escape death because the Huguenots intended to deliver the world from "shavelings and superstition," who all collected tithes for their own benefit.

These outbursts of extreme violence naturally provided the material for interpretive disputes that remain far from being appeased. The uncertainty about the prospects for salvation, the eschatological concerns specific to the time, the militant millennialism of the end of the period all contributed to a crisis of conscience which would not subside until the first part of the 17th century. This resulted in "panic" reactions to the challenge posed by the Protestant heresy, to the point of generating behavior of unheard-of violence among the population, which remained overwhelmingly Catholic.

Protestant violence seems at first to be more psychological and provocative, and iconoclasm was part of this initial violence. Affirming the rejection of the Catholic faith in the name of the fight against "superstition" could also only elicit an extreme reaction. Once wars started, Huguenot violence became physical but appeared to be more thought out and more planned than Catholic violence, the latter most often expressed in the form of an instinctive reaction of self-defense in the face of people who called into question that which the faithful held most sacred.

In the [Dauphiné](#) and in Provence, the Baron des Adrets intended to multiply - with massacres and prisoners thrown into chasm - the examples which would dissuade the Catholics from continuing the struggle. The purpose of the extermination of the priests was to tear the populations, which followed them, from their deadly influence and the hate speech which accompanied this "purification" has very contemporary overtones since it is a question of "expelling the vermin of the shavelings, do away with this malicious breed of the devil, clean up the foxes and cockroaches."

At least as fanatical as the Catholic, Huguenot violence is reminiscent of that which revolutionary France would experience two centuries later. It is a question here of imposing the new conception, based only on the Scriptures, of the kingdom of God. This was all based on a total contempt for those who remained attached to "superstitions," affirming a religion forged over the centuries, of the presence of God in the world - while their opponents, attached to the single letter of Scripture, always identified themselves on the side of Truth and Good.

Historian Philippe Conrad was seminary director at the École supérieure de guerre and director of the Nouvelle Revue d'Histoire. He is the author of several books devoted to the [First World War](#), the conflicts in the [Middle East](#) and the Spanish Civil War.

The [image](#) a colored print showing the Battle of Jarnac in 1569.

Translated from the French by N. Dass.

