

H-France Forum

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Arlette Jouanna, *The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre: The Mysteries of a Crime of State*, trans. Joseph Bergin. Manchester, U.K. and New York, N.Y.: Manchester University Press, 2013. xiv + 271 pp. Glossary, appendix, bibliography, and index. \$100.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0719088315.

Review Essay by Diane C. Margolf, Colorado State University

Historians often seek to identify and analyze “turning points” in history: specific events of such significance that they change, or at least have a lasting effect upon, ensuing developments. For students and scholars of early modern France, the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre has long been regarded as such an event. Arlette Jouanna's *La Saint-Barthélemy: Les mystères d'un crime d'état*, first published in French in 2007 and now available in an excellent English translation by Joseph Bergin, represents an important contribution to our understanding of what happened in Paris on August 24, 1572, and why it matters.

As Bergin notes in his introduction to this forum, connections among religion, politics, and violence have been the focus of much modern scholarship on the Wars of Religion in sixteenth-century France. On the one hand, historians have argued that religion was truly at the heart of people's convictions and actions at this time; it was not simply a mask for political rivalry and ambition. On the other hand, political power and responsibility were typically linked with religion. French kings and lesser magistrates were expected to practice the “one true faith,” protect the Roman Catholic Church in France, and combat religious error. When they appeared to be failing in their duty, they risked losing the loyalty and obedience of their subjects. Ordinary French men and women, in turn, might take matters into their own hands rather than jeopardize their salvation and the spiritual welfare of their communities by allowing heresy to exist in their midst. Events in France also unfolded in an international context which encompassed the crown's diplomatic relations with other European states and the papacy, as well as the family ties that existed between Huguenot nobles and their co-religionists elsewhere.

The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre illustrates the complex nature of these connections by presenting them in concentrated form. Not surprisingly, interpretations of the massacre have reflected the changing historiography of the French Wars of Religion more generally, as evidenced in the works of Natalie Zemon Davis, Mack Holt, Barbara Diefendorf, N.M. Sutherland, Philip Benedict, Robert Kingdon, Janine Garrisson, Denis Crouzet, Jean-Louis Bourgeon, Olivier Christin, David El Kenz, and others. One of the strengths of Jouanna's book is that it integrates the scholarship of these historians (some of which is available only in French) into a clear, readable analysis, made all the more accessible thanks to Joseph Bergin's translation. Jouanna not only synthesizes the work of other scholars, but also draws upon their insights to develop her own account of the massacre. In doing so, she untangles the various elements of this event and places it in a broad historical context.

In Part I, “The Fragility of Concord,” she examines the circumstances that set the stage for the violence which exploded in the streets of Paris in August 1572. These included a decade of conflict between Catholics and Huguenots (French Calvinists), which culminated in the Edict of Saint Germain (1570), notable for its demand that everyone should forget their past differences. The French crown's ability to control civil and religious conflict was challenged by powerful noble families and their clienteles, such as the Guise on the Catholic side and the Bourbon on the Reformed side. King Charles IX and his mother, Catherine de Medici, used marriage—traditionally a means of making peace and consolidating political alliances among royal and aristocratic families—to address this situation, as Catholic and Huguenot

leaders gathered in Paris for the wedding of Henri de Bourbon and the king's sister, Marguerite de Valois. The royal marriage invoked festivity and celebration of a hopeful future. But the crown's efforts to promote peace were shattered by the shooting of Admiral Gaspard de Coligny on August 22. The king, his mother, and the Guise have usually been blamed for this act, which in turn has often been seen as precipitating the massacres of Huguenots that followed. However, Jouanna uncouples the two events. "For the most intransigent Catholics," she states, "peace was a synonym for resignation, surrender, and, therefore, cowardice" (p. 87). For zealous Catholics in Paris, Coligny himself symbolized peace, and thus the attempt against his life was not so much a failed assassination as a successful attack on the peace that they rejected.

The shooting of Coligny, which left him wounded but alive, resulted in two Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacres that Jouanna analyzes in detail in Part II, "Sword of God, Sword of the King." The first of these massacres stemmed from Charles IX's use of violence as an act of "extraordinary" justice in defense of his authority as king and the security of his state. The Huguenot leaders' demands for justice following the attack against Coligny, along with the admiral's own words and actions, revived the king's resentment and fears of these men, who had recently been in open rebellion against him. Acting with advice from his council and relatives, the king ordered the execution of Coligny and a number of other "war Huguenots" who might be capable of taking up arms against the crown on the admiral's behalf (p. 112). Jouanna notes that the king also took steps to secure the city gates and summon the militia, apparently in an attempt to maintain order while the designated Huguenot leaders were being eliminated.

On the morning of August 24, however, the Catholics of Paris began to enact a second massacre, one which reflected popular fears and hostility toward all Huguenots in Paris. The victims of this massacre included pregnant women, the elderly, and children; property was stolen or destroyed, and "for over a month, Catholic gangs imposed a kind of reign of terror in the capital" (p. 142). A number of provincial cities across France also experienced violence against Huguenots, and Jouanna neatly categorizes the factors that tended to permit or prevent such outbreaks. It might have been helpful to have included a map or two to illustrate the specific locations of the violence in Paris and across France. Jouanna's use of letters, chronicles, memoirs, and other accounts of these events is especially effective here. Contemporaries' descriptions of the violence (and a few hair-raising escapes from danger) make it clear why news of the massacre reverberated throughout France and Europe at the time.

What began as an act of sovereign albeit "extraordinary" justice ordered by the king thus became a wave of popular bloodshed that the monarchy could not control. Not surprisingly, royal publicists at home and French diplomats abroad waged a vigorous campaign to explain and justify these events in rather different terms. According to them, Charles IX had punished Coligny and other Huguenot leaders as rebellious subjects, not religious dissidents. The immediacy of their threat to the crown and the kingdom fully justified the king's use of "extraordinary" justice and violent measures to preserve himself and his authority. As for the carnage in Paris and elsewhere, such violence stemmed from popular excesses in defense of the state, which the king condemned. In these accounts, the king was portrayed as the sole and best judge of the state's interests and how to defend them. Despite these elaborate and evolving justifications, Jouanna concludes that Charles IX's effort to assert royal authority through judicial violence against the Huguenots in 1572 produced the opposite effect. The king's actions revived "challenges to royal power and raised questions about the legitimacy of obedience" (p. 149), even though his intention in eliminating Coligny and other selected Huguenot leaders had been "to demonstrate the King's two powers, that of simultaneously being an absolute king and a king of justice" (p. 106).

In the aftermath of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre(s), French men and women on both sides of the confessional divide struggled to understand the meaning of what had occurred, while the French monarchy faced the ongoing task of explaining what it had done—or failed to do—to produce such

disorder. In Part III, “Clarifications and Responses,” Jouanna explores how Catholics and Huguenots alike interpreted the meaning of the massacre's horrific violence in relation to divine judgment, biblical texts, and the history of Christian martyrdom. (Charles IX's death in May 1574 provoked some lively polemics about the king's place among the reprobate or the elect). For jurists and political theorists, the events of August 1572 renewed and intensified debates about obedience to authority and resistance to tyranny that continued throughout the remainder of the religious wars in France. Jouanna draws upon poetry and literature, as well as chronicles, treatises, and letters, to illustrate the multiple ways in which contemporaries expressed their responses to the massacre's legacy. In this section, as elsewhere in the book, her extensive use of primary source material illustrates her argument vividly and effectively. Her assessment of the massacre's impact and significance, however, mainly focuses the political. Over time, she claims, the “super-sacralisation” (p. 226) of the monarch essentially elevated the king beyond the judgment of his subjects, and the union of royal authority with the public good meant that obedience, rather than criticism or consent, became the subject's major duty toward the crown. Arguments about protection from arbitrary authority and the possibility of separating political obedience from religious conformity would also develop in early modern France, but the monarchy was the main beneficiary of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre.

Jouanna concludes that August 24, 1572 was indeed a turning point—“a decisive day in French history” (p. 238). She notes that in retrospect, the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre confirmed the dominance of Catholicism in early modern France, marking the end of the Huguenots' hopes that the realm might one day become Protestant. Most importantly, it affected the direction of political developments, helping to lay the foundation for both the expansion of and challenges to royal authority. In the context of “the memory that the French have of their past” (p. 241), the massacre has mainly served a negative purpose by highlighting the dangers of religious prejudice and intolerance. It still offers a lesson in how readily fears about “others” can be transformed into acts of unbridled violence. This part of the conclusion might have been strengthened by further argument and additional evidence. One might like to know more about how these sixteenth-century events were commemorated in the modern era, leading up to the formal repentance enacted in Paris on August 24, 1997. But for anyone seeking to understand both contemporary experiences and historical interpretations of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, Jouanna's study offers an authoritative account.

Diane C. Margolf
Colorado State University
Diane.Margolf@colostate.edu

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