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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 Allan A. Tulchin, Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania

Introduction

It is a great pleasure to see *The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre* appear in English, particularly since the book did not receive the notice it deserved when it was first published in French. Arlette Jouanna has written a number of books remarkable both for the depth of their research and the clarity of their prose. I also wish that more of her work could appear in English, particularly the narrative portion of her superb *Histoire et dictionnaire des guerres de religion*, which also was not sufficiently widely reviewed.[1] *The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre* is extremely well translated, well researched, powerfully argued, well written, and thoughtful. For this pivotal event in European history it is the best available account.

Professor Jouanna, like other recent writers on the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, focuses particularly on understanding the *mentalité* of its perpetrators. The book begins with a contrast. The author first briefly summarizes the horrifying massacre on 24 August 1572. Then she describes the celebrations six days earlier, on 18 August, when Marguerite de Valois, sister of King Charles IX, married Henri de Navarre, the French Protestant leader. From the "union and concord" that was the theme of the celebrations, to thousands dead, took less than a week. Jouanna asks: "How can such a reversal be explained?" (p. 4). The transformation of Paris from the setting for a wedding to one of mass killing makes the Massacre even more difficult for historians to explain than other comparable episodes in European history. Much of the early part of the book is thus devoted to considering the motives of the participants. Why might the Duke of Guise have ordered the killings? What about the Queen Mother, Catherine de' Medici?

I will organize my analysis in three sections, based on the three phases of the event. First, on 22 August, Charles de Louviers, seigneur of Maurevert, shot and wounded Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, a leading Protestant (p. 73-4). This inflamed tensions between the two parties. Second, on 23 August, the royal council, headed by the king, decided to execute Protestant leaders in Paris (p. 103-4). Third, beginning on 24 August, along with these executions, the Parisian militia began the generalized killing of Protestants (p. 130). Although these events are well known, historians have disagreed about who ordered Coligny's assassination, who ordered the generalized killings, and what their motives were. For each phase I will describe Jouanna's interpretation and then explain why I see things differently.[2] In the last section of the book, Jouanna discusses the consequences of the Massacre for French history and especially for the growth of the French state. Here I largely agree with Jouanna's interpretation, and in the conclusion of this comment I will explain why.

The Assassination Attempt

Jouanna notes that many of those involved in the assassination attempt were connected to the Guise family. The assassin, Charles de Louviers, seigneur de Maurevert, began his career as a household page of François, Duke of Guise. Duke François was assassinated in 1563 by Jean de Poltrot de Méré, but

many in the Guise camp believed that Poltrot de Méré acted on Coligny's orders. The house from which Maurevert fired the shot had been rented by Canon Pierre de Pilles de Villemur, formerly preceptor of Henri, Duke of Guise. Maurevert then took refuge at the chateau of François de Villiers, seigneur de Chailly. Chailly was the superintendent of the affairs of Henri, Duke of Guise (p. 75). But Jouanna argues that Guise was not responsible. She entitles this section of the book "The Attack and Its Unidentifiable Instigator" (p. 78), and argues that Guise could not have been involved because "[w]hatever animosity Henri de Guise felt toward Coligny, he would surely not have wished to undo so perfidiously the public reconciliation to which, on the King's entreaty, he had recently agreed" (p. 80). Jouanna instead suggests that Maurevert and the other plotters deliberately framed Guise for the assassination to force him to champion the Catholic cause more actively. This is first a suggestion: "perhaps the intention was, by implicating them in it despite themselves, to force them out of the inaction which their supporters considered scandalous" (p. 83), but then becomes a fact: "the organization of the ambush and the wish to implicate the Guises in it suggest that the aggressors aimed higher than the person of the Admiral. They tried not just to kill the King's evil counselor, but to assassinate the peace itself" (p. 89).

Jouanna argues that "we should question the obstinacy with which the instigators of such a crime are sought among rulers and the elites. This preoccupation was comprehensible enough among contemporaries, for whom such a bold act as the work of minor individuals was inconceivable, but is much less easy to understand among historians in our time" (p. 83). It is certainly true that for many years prior to 1572 Catherine de' Medici and Charles IX had consistently followed a policy of trying to conciliate the two religious camps, so I am therefore reluctant to believe that they ordered the assassination.[3] I also admit that sometimes sixteenth-century people can seem irrational and paranoid to us. Finally, let me admit that I do not expect to find a "smoking gun"—this is a question of interpretation, not of fact. It nonetheless seems to me to be sounder here to trust their understanding of their society. There is a reason why such an act was "inconceivable" for contemporaries: they understood that their society was very hierarchical and that clients normally obeyed their patrons.

It seems to me more likely that Henri, Duke of Guise ordered the assassination attempt. To summarize: a Guise client committed the murder, firing from the window of a house rented by another Guise client, then took refuge in the house of a third Guise client. Furthermore, on 25 September 1573, a year and a day after Coligny's death, Henri, Duke of Guise awarded Maurevert a pension of 2000 *livres tournois* annually, larger than that of any other member of his household.[4] I find Jouanna's reason for exonerating Guise unpersuasive. Guise could predict that he would get away with killing Coligny because he knew that the crown would hesitate to punish the leader of the Catholic party. I agree that Coligny's assassins intended to inflame religious passions and disrupt the peace, but the simpler explanation is that Guise organized the plot, rather than that his clientele plotted against him.

The Execution of the Protestant Leadership

As Jouanna explains, leading Protestants rapidly concluded that Guise had ordered the assassination attempt, and indeed the king thought so, too (p. 90). However, Protestants knew that it would be hard for the royal courts to render a just verdict, although the king promised that justice would be done (p. 89). Pomponne de Bellièvre (later Chancellor) wrote that on 23 August "a council was held at Coligny's residence and it was resolved that to gain revenge they should go to the Louvre and kill Monsieur de Guise, even if it were at the king's feet" (p. 101). The king and his advisors felt that the Protestant leaders had committed *lèse-majesté* and endangered the state (pp. 103, 106). At a meeting in the late afternoon or evening of 23 August, the king and the royal council ordered the execution of the leading Protestants. Since it would be difficult to arrest the Protestant noblemen and proceed according to the ordinary forms of justice, the "extraordinary" form of killing them had to be used—that is, they had to be cut down without a trial (p. 104). The other Protestant leaders had to be killed too, since otherwise they would take up arms in Coligny's defense (p. 109).

To me, the royal response was dictated by *Realpolitik*. The assassination attempt was a far greater act of *lèse-majesté* than any loose talk by the shocked Protestant leaders. The king believed that Guise's action would provoke a war, and in a war the king had to join the Catholic party. The crown could not join the minority Protestant party in a fight against the majority Catholics. The king and Queen Mother were Catholic after all, and who signs up to fight on the losing side? Indeed, when King Henri III eventually used "extraordinary justice" on the Duke of Guise, in 1588, the results were catastrophic for the crown and led directly to the king's assassination in 1589. If the crown could not punish the attempted assassination of Protestant leaders, then it could not meet the Protestant party's minimum conditions for peace. Civil war was inevitable. And if there was to be war, winning trumped details like justice.

The Massacre

The Duke of Guise was sent by royal order to execute Coligny (p. 110). After checking to see that Coligny was dead, he remarked, "Be brave, soldiers, we have done well, let's go for the others, since the king orders it... it is the king's will, his express command" (p. 128). Jouanna (here following Barbara Diefendorf's interpretation) concludes:

This assertion, which Guise evidently wished to confine to the execution of the Admiral's companions, was understood by those who heard it as the unexpected legitimization of their murderous intentions. Convinced that the King, illuminated by God's grace, had finally accepted the necessity to get rid of all heretics, and elated by the miraculous recovery of their union with their sovereign, Parisians immediately set about the task. It was this tragic misunderstanding which made generalized massacres possible (p. 128). [5]

The massacres were accompanied by "military supervision" and "systematic searches" (131) and indeed were committed by the bourgeois militia (p. 133). The militia members wore white crosses on their hats for identification (p. 130). On 25 August the king ordered a search for Protestants, declaring that they should be guarded, but not hurt, and two or three days later that they be imprisoned for their safety (p. 139). The massacres then spread to a dozen provincial towns. In some letters to provincial officials, the king noted that he was revoking earlier orders given "when he had good reason to worry and fear some fateful event, having discovered the conspiracy against him by the said Admiral" (p. 144). These verbal orders, Jouanna suspects, "provided only for the imprisonment of those Protestants most suspected and the confiscation of their possessions, in order to cope with every eventuality – but not for their extermination" (p. 144).

Although by our standards the Massacre may seem chaotic, by sixteenth-century standards it was quite organized: it was carried out by the civic militia, no part of Paris seems not to have participated, and the troops all bore clear identifying marks on their clothing. This suggests that the Massacre was not spontaneous, and therefore it was not set off by a "tragic misunderstanding" of Guise's words. More likely, he had already coordinated plans with the leaders of the bourgeois militia. It is also possible that the king and royal council ordered, or at least permitted, Guise to lead the charge. Sending Guise to kill Coligny—to finish the job his lieutenants had started—sent a clear message that the crown had thrown in its lot with the extreme Catholic party. Similarly, it is most implausible that the Protestants were to be imprisoned for their own protection: no contemporary Protestant source understood the order that way.

Conclusion: The Rise of Absolutism

As Jouanna recounts, Protestants concluded in the aftermath of the Massacre that "religious division could only increase the crown's power, since it enabled the kings to confirm their power to change the edicts of pacification for reasons of which they were the sole judges" (p. 202). Thus, a number of

Protestant authors, collectively known as the monarchomachs, insisted on the importance of the Estates General to prevent such despotism (p. 202-3). After the Massacre, since it became more difficult to trust the monarchy, Protestant political theorists developed an embryonic contract theory so that future royal transgressions would be seen as crimes that could be punished (p. 204-5). When the Estates General actually met in 1576, its Catholic majority disappointed the Protestant party. Some Catholic noblemen argued that the Massacre was an attack on the power of all the nobility, of whatever confession (p. 206). When Charles IX died in 1574, Protestants viewed it as divine retribution, while in Catholic accounts the king died a perfect Christian death, confessing and taking communion (p. 224). Thus the royal person became sacralized, rather than merely the royal lineage, as had previously been customary (p. 227). With the failure of the Estates and the exaltation of the royal person, the stage was set: “Subsequent events underlined the simplicity of the alternatives facing the French—shared sovereignty or absolute power—while at the same time reinforcing the position of those wishing to remove royal authority from every kind of institutional oversight” (p. 231). The inability of the Protestant and Catholic parties to agree among themselves reinforced the idea that peace had to be imposed from on high by royal authority (p. 232).

Indeed, the Wars of Religion undermined alternate centers of power—the nobility and representative institutions. It also confirmed the crown’s prerogative to arbitrarily arrest, even murder, its political opponents. Thus the effect of the Wars was to centralize decision-making within the crown. The Massacre, by reducing the power of the Protestant party, made it harder for Henri IV to establish his authority after 1589. This gave him more incentive to convert to Catholicism, as he did in 1593, and reduced the power of Protestants under his reign. Had he not converted, Protestant views about state power would have been much more influential. In England, the Reformation strengthened representative institutions; in France, it weakened them. Jouanna argues that only an erroneous, “teleological” conception of history draws a straight line in the growth of royal power from Louis XI to Louis XIV (p. 239). She is absolutely right. The Wars of Religion represent a major fork in the road. Several major meetings of the Estates General in this period suggest that it could have developed into a real national institution. After 1598 that was no longer possible.

NOTES

[1] Arlette Jouanna, Jacqueline Boucher, Dominique Biloghi, and Guy Le Thiec, *Histoire et dictionnaire des guerres de religion, 1559-1598* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1998). Jouanna’s other books include *La France de la Renaissance. Histoire et dictionnaire* (Paris: Laffont, 2001); *La France du XVIe siècle, 1483-1598* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997); and *Le Devoir de révolte. La noblesse française et la gestation de l’État moderne, 1559-1661* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

[2] I have already expressed some of my concerns in “Massacres during the French Wars of Religion,” *Past and Present* Supplement 7 (February 2012): 100-126.

[3] However, as Philip Benedict has noted, the diplomatic sources unanimously blame Catherine de’ Medici for the attempted assassination. See his review (*Le Monde*, 10 June 1994) of Denis Crouzet, *La nuit de la Saint-Barthélémy. Un rêve perdu de la Renaissance* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

[4] Stuart Carroll, *Martyrs and Murderers: The Guise Family and the Making of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 208.

[5] Barbara B. Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 99.

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