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HOW TO SURVIVE A MASSACRE IN EUROPE'S WARS OF RELIGION

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Wars always and inevitably produce atrocities, but not always to the same extent. Civil wars, when the enemy are rebels or criminals or tyrants rather than foreign powers, are particularly open to them; doubly so religious civil wars, in which the enemy are blasphemers or agents of the devil. Who will dare say that there are some punishments which the servants of Satan do *not* deserve? In fact, by the very act of violating the usual norms of war, can you not demonstrate your own superlative zeal for the cause?

The age of the religious wars in Europe was, in short, an age of atrocities. In this lecture I want to look at two such atrocities in particular, how they came about and what their effects have been since: I will even, at the end, attempt an answer to my slightly silly title. But first, let's be clear what we're talking about. We're looking at the period from about 1546 to 1648, when Europe's fault-line between Catholic and Protestant repeatedly erupted into full-scale warfare. This was a consequence of the Protestant Reformation, but not an immediate one. You will notice that the first major religious war, in 1546-7, followed nearly three decades after Martin Luther's initial protest triggered the Reformation: three decades in which more conventional and small-scale techniques of religious coercion, like inquisitorial trials, had tried and failed to keep the burgeoning divisions under control, and in which repeated attempts at negotiated settlements and compromises had foundered, despite some very heavyweight backing. War, in other words, came as a last resort, when everything else had been tried and bitterness was already entrenched. There were religious wars in Germany, in Scotland, in Switzerland and elsewhere, but today I want to concentrate on two of them.

So first, the Netherlands: by which I mean an area extending across the modern Netherlands, Belgium and a decent slice of what's now northeastern France, one of the wealthiest and most densely populated regions of the world, but an area which was, due to the accidents of dynastic marriages and inheritance, under the rule of King Philip II of Spain. The Spanish were famously robust in their Catholicism, but despite formidable repression, the new Protestant message, especially its militant Calvinist variant, was finding increasing support in the Netherlands. In the spring and summer of 1566, Spanish control temporarily broke down, producing the event the Dutch called the Wonderyear, a Protestant surge of open-air preaching and destruction of Catholic imagery. That lasted as long as it took a Spanish army to get there, and was followed by a wave of executions, six years of martial law, and piracy and terrorist actions from exiled and underground Protestant groups. Only in 1572 did that burst into the open, when the Protestants' rag-tag navy was welcomed into the town of Den Briel in Holland, and a full-scale revolt against Spanish rule was triggered. The Dutch war was therefore a nationalist revolt against Spanish rule and a Protestant war against a Catholic regime at the same time, and during the 1570s it briefly looked as if the nationalist cause might sweep all before it, as the Netherlanders were united by Spanish atrocities, in particular the horrifying sack of the city of Antwerp in November 1576 in which at least seven thousand civilians were killed over three days by rioting, unpaid Spanish troops. But the religious division ran too deep, most Catholics in the end remained loyal to Spain, and after a gruelling conflict that was not finally resolved until 1648, the Netherlands was split into an independent, Protestant north – more or less the modern kingdom of the Netherlands – and a Spanish-ruled, Catholic south, the predecessor of modern Belgium.



Meanwhile, a conflict that was perhaps even more destructive was playing out in France, traditionally so staunchly Catholic. As in the Netherlands, a breakdown in government authority in 1560 led to an explosion of interest in and then conversion to Protestantism, such that by early 1562 as much as 15% of the French population, and maybe half of the high nobility, was affiliated with the new Calvinist churches. They were heady, exciting, frightening months: it seemed plausible, even inevitable, that France as a whole was going to flip and turn Protestant. The government was not going to stop it: King Charles IX was only eleven years old, and his mother, Queen Catherine de Medici, was chiefly interested in stitching up a compromise that would hold the kingdom together and was openly willing to grant some toleration to Protestantism. But much of the Catholic population felt differently, and they had a leader in the duke of Guise, head of a powerful princely family who were not about to abandon France to a gaggle of heretics without a fight. On Sunday 1 March 1562, the duke and his entourage stopped to hear Mass at the small town of Wassy in eastern France, near Troyes. Mass was not all they could hear, however: the distinctive French-language psalm-singing of the Calvinists in a barn next door disturbed the service. Guise and some of his soldiers demanded that they be silent. They refused. Guise's men tried to push into the barn. Stones were thrown: one of them hit the duke himself. Perhaps he was looking for an excuse; perhaps he was genuinely provoked; anyway, he ordered his men to seal the barn and burn it to the ground. The most reliable accounts – not that anyone's account of an event like this is ever truly reliable – place the death toll at or around 63 worshippers.

There was a newly-coined word for such an event in France: since the late 1540s, the old word for a butcher's chopping-block, a *massacre*, had been used for this sort of mass butchery too. The massacre at Wassy is a classic example of how violence can suddenly polarise a hitherto tangled situation. Protestants took up arms in self-defence; the duke of Guise's Catholic hardliners took their chance to try to cleanse the realm of Protestants; the crown tried helplessly to hold the ring. Periodically over the next 35 years successive kings imposed compromise peace settlements, but these never held for long before violence erupted again, at least not until the 1590s, when King Henry IV finally managed to impose a settlement granting real, although limited, civil, legal and military rights to the Protestants.

The question has often been asked: were these really wars of religion? Plainly religion never exists in the abstract: it is tangled up with politics, economics, nationalism, culture and all the other things human beings kill each other for. These were not 'pure' wars of religion, nor could there ever be such a thing. But they would have been inconceivable without it, and we can see that if we look at the nature of the violence itself – as a famous argument made by the brilliant American historian Natalie Zemon Davis established.

Consider a recurrent feature of the religious wars which I've already mentioned: iconoclasm, the deliberate destruction by Protestants of objects which Catholics find sacred. We might find this unpleasantly familiar: the echoes of, for example, the destruction of the ruins of Palmyra by the jihadists of Islamic State in 2015, are not an accident. But this phenomenon is worth pausing on because in the midst of a religious war it had two meanings, neither of which is the one we might instinctively give it today. For the iconoclasts, the Protestants, these items were blasphemies: they were insults to God, so profoundly offensive that if they were to leave them be they would be implicitly condoning them and so would be guilty. The fact that they were found in *churches* made it all the more urgent to remove them: how could God's people possibly be expected to worship in the presence of such travesties, such mockeries of what true religion is? There were Biblical verses aplenty, mocking the use of idols, insisting that God does not live in temples made by human hands, that he must be worshipped in spirit and in truth; the Ten Commandments themselves teach, as plainly as you like, that thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image. If you want to feel some of the same sense of outrage and horror they felt, imagine how we would feel about displays of swastikas or fascist imagery today. When postwar Germany cleansed churches of decorations that looked like this – this is one of very few photographs that survive of a church redecorated in the Nazi era – no-one was protesting that this was part of the rich architectural heritage of the nation and slapping preservation orders on it. Such things stink in God's nostrils and we show our own liberation from the horrors they represent by demonstratively destroying them. One obvious sign of this was that iconoclasm sometimes had a ritual dimension to it itself. We hear again and again of cases where images were not only removed, but burned – the punishment for heretics. Or, sometimes, statues of the Virgin Mary had their noses cut off. If the meaning of that isn't immediate obvious, remember that one of the most visible and horrifying symptoms of advanced syphilis is



saddle nose deformity, that is, most of the nose falling off. Syphilis, which was endemic across Europe throughout this period, was naturally associated with moral corruption and especially with prostitution, so much so that in some jurisdictions prostitutes could be punished with having their noses cut off. So to do that to a statue of the Virgin Mary – the ultimate symbol of sexual purity – was to assert very directly that this statue was not the perpetually celibate mother of God, but a mockery of her, a painted strumpet made to lure the faithful from their true beloved into spiritual fornication with some raddled harlot. Such images not only needed to be exposed for what they were, and the Christian community which had tolerated such things for so long needed to cleanse itself, lest God's wrath be poured out on the society which had turned a blind eye to such depravities. Besides these urgent concerns, our modern worries about historical or artistic value would have seemed like the most pathetic mewling. Yes, of course these objects were pretty. That was what made them so dangerous.

For Catholics, of course, the question was quite reversed. It is not merely the blasphemy they felt in the act of deliberately violating a statue created to honour a saint – which they were well aware, of course, was in itself just a piece of wood. There were also relics: objects physically connected to a saint, even a parts of their bodies, points at which the kingdom of heaven touches earthly, through which the faithful continued to receive miracles of healing. Now the Protestants were wantonly destroying them. Churches had been beautified at great cost over centuries, as generations of faithful Christians had laboured so that everything that believers saw and heard would lift up their hearts to heaven: now it was all being ripped out in an instant, and the Catholics were being told that *they* were the blasphemers? It came to a head over the most contentious object of all, the consecrated Host that was kept reserved in most Catholic churches. For Catholics, according to the famous doctrine of transubstantiation, although this object looked like a small white wafer, it was in fact the real, physical flesh of Jesus Christ, body, blood and bone, and should be treated with all the reverence and – in the fullest sense – worship that is due to God himself incarnate, the uncreated Son and divine Word. For Protestants, it was the ultimate blasphemy: this little object was literally being worshipped as God. It was their duty to the true God who was so perilously mocked by this parody to grind these wafers into the mud.

Still, iconoclasm has this much going for it: it is violence against *objects* not against *people*. And it is true that a lot of Protestant violence was directed in this way. Not all, though, because the boundary is easily crossed. When a Catholic priest is celebrating the foul satanic ritual he calls the Mass, or when Catholics are holding a solemn procession with a saint's statue, Protestant mobs or provocateurs might try to stop them, which is how riots start. Catholic priests, monks and nuns were particularly liable to be attacked. During the terrorist phase of the Dutch Revolt I was mentioning earlier, in the late 1560s, a group in Flanders known as the Wood Beggars staged a series of outrages in which priests were murdered; several of the bodies were mutilated either before or after they were killed, most commonly by castrating them, an all-too-obvious comment on the way that Catholic priests' compulsory celibacy was both unnatural and, as everyone knew, a cloak for their voracious lusts. Just as with the mutilation of statues of the Virgin Mary, this was about stating that supposed holiness was a cloak for corruption, whether that statement was written on wood or human flesh. Priests were also murdered during the French religious wars: this incident, in which a priest was fastened to a crucifix and then shot, was a particularly powerful symbol of the way that the violence which begins by cleansing the temple of idolatrous objects could easily spill over into cleansing it of idolatrous people. So powerful a symbol, in fact, that we have to ask whether it really happened, or at least whether it really happened quite as this propaganda pamphlet on the horrible cruelties of the Calvinists really portrayed it. I am not so much questioning the account as saying that this is such a picture-perfect atrocity that, if it were not true, Catholic propagandists would have had to invent it. In any case, the larger point stands: Protestant violence began with destroying sacred objects and ended with killing sacred people, and anyone who defended them.

Catholic violence aimed, in much the same way, to cleanse Christian society from pollution and impurity, but with one crucial difference: the impure elements were not objects but people, the persons of the heretics themselves. From the start, Catholic violence tended to be directed at religious cleansing, by terrorising, driving out and indeed exterminating the heretical infestation. The gangrenous limb needed to be cut out of Christendom to stop the rot from spreading, and that urgent surgical necessity meant that normal niceties such as due process or a presumption of innocence were unaffordable luxuries. Sometimes there was a rough process of sorts: such as in a repeated scene in several French cities on the eve of the civil wars, when a group of Catholic vigilantes would set up an



impromptu saint's shrine in the street, and challenge passers-by to cross themselves or otherwise show appropriate devotion: anyone who refused would be murdered as a Protestant. And this was often overlaid with apocalyptic urgency. The collapse of Christian society into internecine warfare looked very like a sign of the end of the age: this was the beginning of Armageddon, the final test in which Christ would spit out the lukewarm moderates from his mouth and demand true allegiance. For Catholics, to purge the realm of heretics in such a moment was both an urgent necessity and a glorious privilege, a chance to be a warrior of God. In this sense, actual warfare – clashes between armies – was almost peripheral: the burning of the barn in Wassy shows what it was all really aimed at. In the next century, one of the shrewdest observers of the English Civil War commented that 'the war was begun in our streets before the King or Parliament had any armies', and that comment could stand for the era of the religious wars as a whole. The real wars happened between two mobilised civilian populations, each desperately trying to cleanse their community of fatally dangerous pollution.

If Catholic apocalypticism tended to remove any constraints from their violence, the Protestants' apocalypticism had an equally pervasive consequence: for Protestants were theologically inclined to expect and indeed to revel in persecution and victimhood. Martin Luther had primed them to expect to follow in Christ's footsteps and to suffer as he suffered. They read in the New Testament that God disciplines those whom he loves, and that it is a grace and a privilege to suffer injustice for the sake of the Gospel. And so, well, maybe they did not exactly seek suffering out, but when it came, they were unsurprised by it and, crucially, undeterred by it. Arrest them, murder them, massacre them, and you only stiffened their resolve and proved them right. They would take up and re-tell the story of their sufferings and turn it against you. They were, in fact, a remarkably difficult community to intimidate. Violence simply didn't seem to work against them. There would be several ways for their enemies to respond to that frustrating fact, but the obvious one was, of course, to redouble their efforts.

All right. Enough generalities. I want to look at two particular events during the religious wars which illustrate the way that particular atrocities could happen in this system, and how they could break its bounds. One Dutch, one French. From October 1573 to October 1574, the rebel Dutch city of Leiden was besieged by the Spanish, with a brief break from April to May '74 when some resupply was possible. The siege itself was not especially violent: the Spanish could not assault the city because the ground was too wet to dig trenches. But aside from that brief interlude, it was tight. Around 6000 of the city's 15000 residents died during the second, more intense phase of the siege, from May until the city was relieved on 3 October. It was a decisive battle during the war for Dutch independence: had the city fallen, South Holland would have been Spain's to take, whereas the Dutch victory helped spark a wave of desertions by Spanish soldiers and marked their effective eviction from the province of Holland. That was partly because the victory was itself a genuinely impressive military achievement: in a very Dutch way, it was achieved by cutting dikes so as to deliberately flood large parts of Holland, forcing the Spanish to retreat further and also, critically, enabling a fleet of rebel barges to reach the city and deliver 8000 soldiers. Even so, for the relieving forces to fight their way through to the city was painfully slow. As deaths mounted, there were riots against a city government that refused to surrender, and bitter divisions as the property of Catholic citizens was seized and redistributed. But while food was very tight, the city was not on the edge of starvation. The deaths were mostly due to disease: they called it plague, though what that actually meant is anyone's guess. Food was not about to run out: there was a ration of horsemeat still being distributed to every household until the very end of the siege.

But this is not quite how the event was remembered, and remembered it was: and here I should say I am following the terrific Dutch historian Judith Pollmann. It became one of the great myths of the Dutch Revolt, the story of how the city had hung on in the face of starvation until finally the relieving force arrived and had distributed herring and bread to the people, in a plain echo of Christ's feeding of the five thousand; in reality they had also given out cheese, but that didn't fit the myth so neatly. Nor did plague, which looked uncomfortably like divine judgement rather than Spanish cruelty. Instead, the stories that were told focused on the often-depicted moment of deliverance, and emphasised the courage and sufferings of the people in the face of mounting hunger. The city's mayor, Pieter van der Werff, became one of the heroes, having supposedly faced down fainthearts who wanted to surrender by telling them they would have to kill him first, and offering to cut off his own arm to feed the hungry rather than to give in. These stories, unsurprisingly, were much encouraged by his own family and descendants. Others grabbed their share of the glory too: the owners of the carrier pigeons which had kept the



city in touch with the rebel armies became heroes, were granted a new coat of arms and the surname van Duivenbode – ‘of the carrier pigeon’; the pigeons themselves, when they died, were stuffed and displayed in the town hall. You can still see the van Duivenbode monument in Leiden: most aristocratic monuments were destroyed in the wake of the French Revolution, but not this one, which as you can see was renovated in 1818. And as the siege faded into memory, and the town’s population rapidly grew so very few of its residents had even a familial connection, the legends grew ever more extreme. A history of the siege written in 1642 described how bones, chewed first by the dogs, were sucked dry by boys, and when a piece of meat fell on the floor at the place where they handed out the meat, they leaped at it and wolfed it down raw. The blood was scooped out of the gutters and slurped down.¹

Narratives of starving cities under siege are a well-worn genre going back to ancient times, but these stories did not take the normal tack, with tales of cannibalism and social breakdown; instead it was the citizens’ stoic self-sacrifice that was emphasised, with nursing mothers unable to produce milk and feeding their starving infants with their own blood instead. The tales also emphasised social solidarity, the rich and the poor alike sharing what little they had. Relics of the siege were treasured: in particular cooking vessels which were used for the feasts held in commemoration of the end of the siege on 3 October each year. Leiden’s university took up the theme, sermons were preached, plays were staged. In the process, the divisions which had wracked the city during the siege were airbrushed out of the account. The entire city, legend firmly insisted, had suffered together, Catholic and Protestant alike: a religiously divided nation could join in commemorating their collective suffering at the hands of the Spanish. This new staged photographic image of the siege was commissioned by the city museum in 2011.

So this still-popular myth was, we have to recognise, a largely benevolent way of processing the traumatic memory of the siege: by concentrating on the injustice which the entire city suffered, it could knit together a religiously divided society with the soothing power of victimhood, and until modern historians got hold of the legend with their carping insistence on unwelcome values like facts, everyone was happy. Of course, the legend did also require demonising the Spanish as a national enemy. But that is what they mean when they say that history is written by the victors.

My second event is a darker story, and it comes from the French wars. By 1570, there had been three bouts of open warfare, each one brought to an end when the crown tried to impose a compromise settlement. The 1570 compromise looked as fragile as its predecessors, but the young king Charles IX and his mother Catherine de Medici had a plan, in two parts. First, a marriage alliance, marrying the most highborn of the Calvinist noblemen, Henry of Navarre – who would in fact later become king, and convert to Catholicism to secure his throne – to marry him to the king’s own sister, Margaret; then, to use this united front to take France to war against the old enemy, Spain, a national cause which they hoped might cut across religious lines. It was not a foolish plan, and they were not the only politicians in Europe hoping to find a way to break the religious impasse: their contemporary Queen Elizabeth I in England had parallel ambitions. So in August 1572 the great and the good of both parties gathered in Paris. The city was already, everyone knew, overwhelmingly and violently Catholic, its embattled Protestant minority protected against vigilante attacks only by the crown’s determination to impose a pacification that much of the citizenry did not want. For the moment, the city chafed, but accepted this. The marriage took place in Notre Dame on 18 August, despite the Pope’s condemnation of a marriage between a Catholic and a heretic. Soon the assembled notables would disperse. Maybe it was going to work.

Then, on Friday 22 August, Gaspard de Coligny, the Protestant nobleman who had become the most important political and military leader of the Protestants, was shot in the street and badly wounded. No-one knew for sure then, and we still do not know now, exactly who shot him or why, but we do know that the shot was fired from a house belonging to the dukes of Guise, the leaders of the rejectionist Catholic faction, the same ones responsible for the massacre at Wassy ten years earlier. And it instantly plunged the capital into a crisis. Rumour and counter-rumour, then and now: exactly what happened between the Friday and the Sunday morning is still hotly contested. For myself, I am not persuaded that the original assassination attempt itself was planned or sanctioned by the king

¹ Pieter Cornelisz Hooft, *Nederlandsche Historien* (1642), quoted in Judith Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe 1500-1800* (Oxford, 2017), 110-11



or the queen mother, but it might have been, and certainly the paranoid rumours that whipped through Paris suggested that. It was obvious that the results were going to be bleak. Another round of religious war seemed likely; there was fear that the Calvinist leaders gathered in Paris might attempt a coup, and certainly rising fury from the Calvinists about it. They pressed the injured Coligny to leave Paris and prepare for battle. Instead, he chose to remain, trusting the king and queen mother to keep the peace. The royal family and their advisors spent much of Saturday 23 August cloistered in a crisis meeting at the Louvre. We do not, of course, know exactly what happened, but I can tell you what seems likely. Aware that the city was a powder keg and that the presence of the Calvinist leadership made this a particularly dangerous moment, aware that rightly or wrongly they were being blamed for the assassination, the king and his mother decided that the time had come to abandon their attempt to play both sides and work for reconciliation. Instead, they had, as it seemed, an opportunity to mount a coup of their own: to act swiftly and suddenly to cut the head off the snake, and bring the endless round of civil war to an end at a stroke, by taking out the entire Calvinist leadership. The rumours circulating that the Calvinists were themselves planning to murder the king and seize power only made it seem more urgent. Anyway, what we know is that late on Saturday 23rd it was decided to follow up the botched assassination of Coligny with a simultaneous strike against the entire Calvinist leadership, to be carried out by the king's personal guard in alliance with the duke of Guise's men. Overnight, the city gates were sealed and boats on the Seine were impounded to prevent any attempts at escape. The murders began at around four AM on Sunday 24 August, St Bartholomew's day: St Bartholomew, ominously, was the patron saint of butchers, and it was a festival day when norms were already half-suspended. The king's Swiss Guard broke into the house where the injured Coligny was being tended. Coligny was swiftly murdered, but the break-in, and perhaps the ringing of bells, had already roused a neighbourhood that was at hair-trigger readiness. Was this the long-feared Protestant coup? Catholics poured out into the streets. It turned out to be something else. The critical moment, it's been very plausibly argued, was when the duke of Guise himself came out of Coligny's lodgings after the murder, and there, in the street and in the hearing of the public, instructed his men to move on to the rest of the Calvinist leadership, and said the words: *Le Roi le veut*. The king commands it.

For Paris' fervently Catholic population, who had spent ten or more years being restrained by the king from purging the Protestant pollution in their midst, those words signalled a moment of release: a long-overdue permission to do what they had long known must be done. The rumour swept through the city. In other words, the massacre that followed does not seem to have been actively premeditated by the king and his mother: they had planned a targeted strike at the leadership. What they got instead was a genocidal purge. This early woodcut shows the whole story, from the attempted assassination through the murder to the general butchery.

The numbers are disputed, but a sensible guess of the deaths in Paris on St Bartholomew's Day and the two or three days following would be 3000, give or take. But the figures do not convey the experience very well. For example: the Protestant merchant family of Mathurin Lussault had imagined their business dealings with the royal court gave them some protection. When the doorbell was rung early that morning, Mathurin himself went to answer it, and was stabbed to death on the spot. His son managed to escape into the street and beat on a neighbour's door for refuge: the neighbour refused to open and the young man was butchered in the street. His mother, Mathurin's wife, jumped from an upstairs window into a next-door courtyard, breaking her legs in the fall. She was at least luckier with her choice of neighbour: this one hid her in his cellar, but the mob, spotting the open window, worked out where she was and dragged her out into the street by her hair. They cut off her hands to get the bracelets on her wrists and impaled her on a roasting-spit, dragging her body through the streets before dumping it in the river. A number of witnesses reported that the Seine ran red with blood by the end of the day, and this may be more than just a figure of speech.

Only a minority of Paris' Catholics were actively involved in the killing, but if most of their neighbours were too ambivalent or too frightened to shelter fugitives, or to face down the mobs when they came calling, a minority was all that was needed. Most of the dead were Protestants, but some Catholics who did try to protect their Protestant neighbours were killed too. Some of those neighbours were genuinely horrified: the duke of Guise himself, the arch-Catholic who had killed Coligny and then cried 'the King wills it', sheltered a number of Protestant families in his Paris house, though he did also try to have some of their children rebaptised as Catholics. Others were more openly mercenary: some Protestants paid handsomely for the shelter they received. And as



Mme Lussault's grisly example shows, there was pillage and looting, but it was secondary and opportunistic: a case of God's soldiers taking a well-earned reward for their service, not the purpose of the killing. The ritual quality to the murders is a constant theme of the reports. The small children whose parents are killed in front of them, and who are then stripped naked and dipped in their parents' blood as a kind of anti-baptism, to free them of the stain of Calvinism so that they could at least be allowed to live. The Protestant bookseller burned alive on a bonfire of his own heretical books. The Protestants forced to recite Catholic prayers before being killed – we were past the point where they could save their lives that way, though no doubt some tried. Above all, the quasi-judicial quality of a lot of the killings: this was a crowd that wanted to think of itself as fulfilling a royal and divine command, not as a murderous mob. Coligny's body was mutilated and paraded through the city, with rioters styling themselves his judges and proclaiming the sentence against him at each intersection before dumping the body in the river. It is no accident that so many of these stories end in the river, the providential means which God had provided to wash a guilty city clean.

By all accounts the king and court were both surprised and alarmed – not, perhaps, horrified – by what had happened, and by midweek the city had been brought back under control. But by then events had already been set in motion elsewhere. During September and into October there were copycat massacres in a dozen other cities, including major centres such as Lyons, Troyes, Rouen, Bordeaux and Toulouse. Royal letters had quickly gone out urging provincial governors to keep the peace, but not quickly enough: some of those in Paris on the morning of St Bartholomew's Day appear to have been given verbal instructions at court which they took as permission or command to follow Paris' example. In cities which had been chafing at the open presence of heresy for a decade, that was all it took: as in Paris, a spark of legitimacy was enough. The king had not endorsed massacres, but he had, it seems, hesitated and equivocated, and that was enough. None of the provincial cities endured killing on Paris' scale, but between them they more than double the total death toll, which very likely stands the wrong side of ten thousand.

So what did it mean? The king's eventual efforts to bring an end to the killing might indicate that this was one of those atrocities which no-one wants to own, but no: many Catholics celebrated it as a long-overdue, providentially-enabled act of cleansing, with nothing to regret except that it was brought to a premature end, and French Protestantism was wounded rather than exterminated. Famously, notoriously, Pope Gregory XIII ordered Mass sung in celebration, for it seemed to portend that the king of France had finally stopped playing both sides and had turned decisively to the true faith. He had this commemorative medal struck when he heard the news, showing an avenging angel and with the unambiguous words 'Massacre of the Huguenots'; and he commissioned these splendid frescoes by Vasari that you can still see in the Apostolic Palace. If we look more closely at this one, we can see it moves from Coligny's murder to the massacre itself. It would be a generation before French Catholic stories of the massacre began to change colour, with the emphasis being placed on the brutality of the mob, and tales instead being told of individuals like the aristocratic governor of Provence, who told the king had ordered a massacre supposedly replied, 'I have always served the king as a soldier; I would be dismayed to serve him now as an executioner.' Soon enough Catholic France tried to forget the massacre, subsuming it into the act of collective wilful amnesia that was applied to the era of the civil wars as a whole: a both-sides-ism that smothered individual events with a distancing moral equivalency.

For the surviving Protestants, of course, matters were different. Maybe the most important reaction was shock. I said that the numbers of dead are still disputed: unsurprisingly, in the first wave of rumours, the guesses trended high. Fifty thousand, a hundred thousand dead were spoken of. 'The whole of France', wrote Geneva's city council, 'is bathed in the blood of innocent people and covered with dead bodies.' Letters written by Protestants in the immediate aftermath of the massacre are numb with disbelief. They had assembled in Paris believing there was to be a new settlement: instead their leaders were dead, the king had turned on them – in what they were sure was a fully premeditated plot – and thousands of their brethren had been butchered. Hence maybe the most important consequence of the massacre. I mentioned before how Protestants interpreted persecution as a sign of God's approval and were therefore inoculated against intimidation. Well, up to a point. The massacre broke the bravado of Protestantism's martyr-complex. The scale and speed of the killing left the dazed survivors questioning whether God really was on their side. And while in truth the numbers of the dead were only a tiny proportion of France's Protestants, the massacre virtually eliminated Protestantism from large areas of the country. In Rouen,



for every Protestant who was killed, ten converted to Catholicism. The Protestant minorities who had held on in a great many regions were effectively snuffed out.

But they were not a minority everywhere, and not all the leaders had been killed. Especially in their strongholds in south-western France, the massacre predictably provoked not surrender but outraged defiance. The city of La Rochelle took up arms almost immediately, refusing to allow a royal governor in, and within weeks it was under siege and another religious war was under way. As news spread across the continent, Protestants everywhere were horrified and confirmed in all their worst suspicions about Catholics. It became common knowledge that the massacre had been coordinated from Rome and had indeed been planned at the Council of Trent, the great Catholic ecumenical council that had concluded nine years earlier. We can I think forgive them some conspiracy theories: a French king who had spent a decade trying to be a moderating influence had indeed suddenly changed sides, and while in retrospect we can see that as a brief aberration made under extreme pressure, it was not unreasonable to think he was at last revealing his true colours. In any event, the massacre quickly took pride of place in international Protestantism's lovingly curated pantheon of Catholic atrocities. Christopher Marlow staged a play about it, *The Massacre at Paris*, which depicted the massacre as a long-plotted Machiavellian scheme. Accounts of the massacre continued to be published through the seventeenth and eighteenth century: it was treated rather like we nowadays treat the Nazi Holocaust, as a terrible event which there was an obligation to remember.

And it fundamentally changed the nature of the war for French Protestants. They were no longer fighting to have the king grant them rights; they acquired a revolutionary edge, seeing the king as a tyrant to be resisted or even assassinated, not a good lord misled by wicked advisors. Radical constitutional theories, notions of constitutional monarchy and lawful rebellion, began surfacing amongst French Protestants. After the bloodbath in Paris there was no going back, or so it seemed. This is why Thomas Carlyle said, in the nineteenth century, that without the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre there would have been no French Revolution, and why nineteenth-century anti-monarchists continued to recall it in paintings like this, showing the Queen Mother regarding the scene with grim satisfaction. Be that as it may, the meanings attached to it in France have changed over the centuries. The problem, of course, is that French Protestants were finally expelled from France by Louis XIV in 1685; so there was no substantial French constituency still nursing the memory of its injuries. Instead, the massacre became, for Voltaire for example, a symbol of religious intolerance and the abuse of power by churches in general, and during the French Revolution the story was strongly revived on these terms. Several plays of that era referenced it, most notably Joseph Chénier's *Charles IX*, which used the massacre to demonstrate that religions and kings are both equally evil, and which had long been blocked by the censor. When it was finally performed in November 1789, it was already notorious. One critic called the play an 'evening of blood', which in the context of the French Revolution was meant as a compliment. Robespierre's colleague Camille Desmoulins saw the play as having been decisive in moving the Revolution forward. Chénier, as a member of the National Convention, put his principles into practice and voted for the execution of Louis XVI.

The massacre hasn't exactly been forgotten in modern times: there was an opera in the 1830s; Mark Twain, in a mood of jet-black irony, called the massacre 'unquestionably the finest thing of the kind ever devised and accomplished in the world', on the unarguable basis that 'all the best people took a hand in it'. There are still painters, like this Russian, who draw meaning from the story, notably the malign, brooding power of the Church. In the twentieth century, there were several cinematic depictions, and even an early *Doctor Who* story, which like many of the early *Doctor Whos* is now sadly lost. The best-known cinematic version is in the 1994 remake of the 1954 film of Alexandre Dumas' 1845 novel *La Reine Margot*, which has a lengthy and graphic depiction of the massacre, distinguished in a very Gallic way by the fact that a great many of the participants appear to have been wearing very little.

Still, for such a cataclysmic event, its modern cultural footprint is relatively modest, I think for a simple reason: neither its victims nor even its villains have any particular salience any more. French Protestantism is not extinct, but nor does it still cherish its persecution; French Catholicism has been frozen out of any kind of power for over a century now; and France has had neither king nor emperor for 150 years. In other words, the story no longer serves anyone's cause, and can become merely a backdrop – as in *La Reine Margot*, or in the pre-Raphaelite painting



by Millais, *A Huguenot on St Bartholomew's Day*, which managed to turn it into a story of doomed and heroic love. Don't let anyone tell you that romantic trivialisation is something invented in our own times.

So how do you survive a massacre in the wars of religion? Well, don't answer the front door while it's going on, but the contrasting examples of Leiden and Paris mean we can also answer that question on two slightly less superficial levels. If you are a community that has suffered an atrocity, you survive and recover from it by making the right use of it: by not allowing it to break your nerve and instead keeping its memory alive as means to unite you against your foes. As we have seen, in that sense parts of French Protestantism survived the massacre, and others did not; whereas the Dutch managed to use the sufferings of Leiden, and the atrocities that followed, much more effectively. And most importantly of all, if you are a country where such an atrocity has taken place, setting citizens against one another and creating bitter memories of betrayal and murder that can be remembered for generations, you survive the trauma not by trying to forget it, but by how you choose to remember it. If you are the Dutch, you play down the divisions, forget the plague, emphasise communal suffering, make sure the foreigners are the common enemy, and slather the story thickly enough with myth that it becomes a uniting rather than a dividing force: and once that myth has dried hard for a century or two, enough will have healed underneath that the historians can be let loose to break things up without any obvious danger. If you are the French, you wait until the bitterness has finally exhausted itself, you allow it to be crowded out by more modern traumas, and at last you reach a point where the story of the atrocity no longer moves anyone to call for fresh blood. Then and only then, when it has simply become history and the dead can be allowed to rest in peace, can a nation truly say that it has survived a massacre.

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