

THE EUROPE OF WARS OF RELIGION

The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre Seen from the Rest of Europe

Nicolas BRETON

ABSTRACT

No one seriously thinks of the French Wars of Religion (1562-1598) as a strictly French phenomenon any more. The quest for moral, theological, political, financial and/or military help by both the Huguenots and the Catholics demonstrates that clearly enough. The intense political activity in the court of France by ambassadors representing European monarchs also emphasizes the fact that those rulers were more than just spectators to the conflicts. As the climax of religious violence committed during those civil wars, the eve of Saint Bartholomew's Day – the targeted elimination of Huguenot leaders which was then followed by a generalized massacre of the Protestant population in Paris and the provinces starting on August 24, 1572 – was commented on across Europe. This entry offers a rapid overview of the reactions kindled by the news of the massacre.



The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre by François Dubois (ca. 1572-1584).

Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#).

François Dubois was in his early 40s in 1572, when he survived the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre. As a refugee in Geneva, he painted this now-famous painting, in which he depicted the horror of the violence, the fate meted out to Admiral de Coligny and the belief, which was widespread amongst the Huguenots at the time, of Catherine de' Medici's active involvement in the massacre.



Obverse: GREGORIUS XIII PONT. MAX. AN. I Reverse: V. GONOTTORVM STRAGES 1572 ("Massacre of the Huguenots, 1572"), Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#).

This Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre commemorative medal was made at the request of Pope Gregory XIII in 1572, the first year of his papacy. On the reverse, not men, but an angel is slaying the Protestants, as is made clear by the caption, which says, "Massacre of the Huguenots."



Jan Matejko, *Golden Liberty (The Election of Henri de Valois as King of Poland)*, 1573, oil on canvas, 1889, Royal Castle of Warsaw. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#).

On May 11, 1573, thanks to the deft diplomacy of Jean de Monluc, bishop of Valence, Henry of Valois was elected king of Poland-Lithuania. Crowned on February 21, 1574, three days after his arrival in Cracow, he abandoned his crown precipitously on June 18 of that same year in order to return to France upon having learned that his brother, Charles IX, had died without issue.

Protestant Europe's Horror

Unsurprisingly, Protestant Europe was horrified when it found out about the massacre. First came the official information sent to courts and councils, which was followed by eyewitness accounts from survivors, like the artist

François Dubois (1529-1584), who painted the famous *Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre* (ill. 1). The reformed Swiss cantons, Lutheran and Calvinist monarchs in the Empire, Scandinavian kings and the Queen of England were stunned by the news at first. Yet from a political point of view, the Crown of France wanted to stay on good terms with Elizabeth I (1559-1603), with whom it had recently concluded the defensive Treaty of Blois, on April 19, 1572. For that reason, King Charles IX (1560-1574) and Catherine de' Medici pulled out all the diplomatic stops in the weeks following the massacre in order to appease the queen's ire.

On August 25, the king wrote to his ambassador in London providing a new justification for the massacres. Although the day before, he had blamed the violence on the vendetta between the Houses of Guise and Coligny, he was now assuming full responsibility for the massacres. He acknowledged having decided that the Huguenot leaders should be executed after he found out about a conspiracy against himself and his family hatched by Gaspard de Coligny (1519-1572) and his fellow Huguenots. But what Elizabeth I could not tolerate was the extraordinary nature of the royal decision: Charles IX had acted outside of any legal framework. In her opinion, it would have been far preferable to have Admiral Coligny arrested and tried properly in court. That allows us to understand the subsequent arrest, trial and conviction of two of Coligny's faithful lieutenants, Arnaud de Cavagnes and François de Briquemault. On October 27, 1572, the two men were hanged by torchlight after having been found to be accomplices in Coligny's plot and declared guilty of high treason. As for the admiral himself, he was tried and convicted post-mortem on October 30. Those convictions finally incorporated the extraordinary decision taken by the Council on August 23 into a legal framework, and were immediately communicated around Europe, and particularly England. Elizabeth I yielded.

Catholic Europe's Disappointed Hopes

While the courts of Protestant monarchs across Europe were stunned, reactions were more divided in Catholic Europe. Emperor Maximilian II (1562-1576), who, like Charles IX, ruled a bi-religious nation, remained imperturbable, unable to express any reaction that would not offend one side or the other. Others, like the Duke of Savoy and Philip II of Spain (1556-1598), rejoiced in the news. The latter went so far as to smile and even burst out laughing during a conversation with the French ambassador: exceptional public behavior for a monarch. He was in fact doubly pleased: not only had the King of France finally decided to resolve the Protestant problem in his kingdom, the events also ruled out the specter of a French intervention in the Netherlands that he had been dreading since the spring. In Madrid, as in Florence, Venice, Brussels and Rome, processions were organized to give thanks to God.

In Rome, news of the massacre reached the city on September 2, and was conclusively confirmed on the fifth. Pope Gregory XIII (1572-1585) did not conceal his satisfaction either. Even before the news had been officially confirmed, he ordered the lighting of celebratory bonfires and compared the massacre in Paris to the battle of Lepanto, which had taken place the previous year. The analogy between the struggle against the Turks and the one against the Protestants sheds light on the "militant" nature of the post-Tridentine Church. For several days, Victory Arches dotted the Eternal City, and triumphal prayer meetings and processions were organized. The largest of those took place on September 8. Accompanied by members of the clergy, the pope crossed the city, from Saint Mark's Basilica to the Church of Saint Louis of the French. A second procession that same day had children marching through the streets holding olive branches to thank God for having touched the King of France's heart. Finally, on September 11, the Pope decreed a jubilee, thereby creating a normalized setting for the celebrations. But the Curia's enthusiasm waned as the king of France's actions went contrary to their expectations. Unlike what the Pope had assumed, King Charles IX of France still did not turn out to be in favor of integrating the Holy League, which was fighting against the Turks. To make matters worse, he was even still negotiating with the Protestants on the basis of the Peace of St. Germain en Laye (1570). Disappointed by the turn of events, the Holy See decided to appropriate the massacre by commissioning, among other things, medals on which an angel was pointing his weapon at slaughtered Huguenots sprawled dead on the ground (ill. 2). With no reference to France, the Saint

Bartholomew's Day massacre had become, not a French event, but a divine one.

The Political Consequences in Bohemia and Poland

In the end, the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre had political consequences well beyond France's borders, particularly in Poland and Bohemia. Just a few weeks after the attack on Coligny, King Sigismund II Augustus of Poland passed away. There were two possible candidates to succeed him: Ernest, from the House of Habsburg, a son of Emperor Maximilian II; and Henry, Duke of Anjou, Charles IX's younger brother. Unsurprisingly, the Habsburgs took leapt at the massacres as a way to discredit the French prince's candidacy. Images began to circulate in which the king and his brother were portrayed urging the crowd on and encouraging the torture inflicted on the Huguenots. To thwart that offensive, two French diplomats, Jean de Monluc and Jean de Poix, who were both proponents of religious tolerance, were dispatched to Poland to bolster the Duke of Anjou's candidacy. That was the context in which the Convocation Sejm (an assembly tasked with establishing the rules of candidacy for the crown) ratified the Confederation of Warsaw on January 28, 1573: the future king of Poland had to commit to maintaining religious peace and guaranteeing Protestants access to the same positions and honors as Catholics. Elected on May 11 of that year, Henry of Anjou objected to those requirements for a certain time (ill. 3).

Unlike Poland, Bohemia had been torn by religious differences. The Reformation having become firmly established, the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre stirred people up, because for many, that royal decision was interpreted as a warning. Convinced that they needed to act to protect the safety of their lives, liberties and goods, in 1575, Czech Protestants worked on a text based on the Augsburg Confession (1530): the *Confessio Bohemica*, or Bohemian Confession. Debates grew tense as hearsay ran through the city like wildfire during the Diet of Prague. Rumor had it that the Jesuits at the court had convinced Maximilian II to follow the Parisian example and bathe the city in blood. Those fears reached a paroxysm on June 26, 1575, on the eve of the wedding of a lady of the court! Under pressure from those events, the emperor accepted the confession of faith in September, but only orally. The memory of the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre meant that the struggle for formal recognition of the text continued under the leadership of Vaclav Budovec (1551-1621), who described himself as having himself been profoundly affected by the events in Paris (although he hadn't actually stepped foot in the city until 1573). He is the one who extracted the Letter of Majesty - which finally made good on the Bohemian Confession - from Rudolph II, in 1609.

Whether horrified or pleased by that exceptional event, Catholic and Protestant monarchs and communities did not settle for condemning or celebrating the massacre, they appropriated it, making it part of their own history.

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