

# Print Wars in Europe during the Sixteenth Century

## Author-s:

[Tatiana DEBBAGI BARANOVA](#) [1]

## Abstract

Print played a central role in political and religious conflicts in Europe during the sixteenth century. Both Protestant reformers and defenders of the Catholic Church saw it as an effective instrument for raising awareness, informing the population, and garnering its support. The politicization of religious conflicts promoted the production and diffusion of texts that justified uprisings against authorities, explained the actions of these authorities, and formulated political theories. The publication campaigns organized by genuine specialists in writing became an indispensable element for any kind of mobilization. While the print runs were relatively modest in comparison to the vast majority of the illiterate population, print exerted an important influence, as it targeted the elites who possessed the power of action and who could serve as intermediaries towards oral forms of information diffusion.

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## Article

With the development of printing, sixteenth-century Europeans experienced what could be called the first media revolution. They were convinced that print represented a formidable weapon in the service of a political or religious cause. The print runs for *libelles*—short and aggressive works on topical subjects—naturally remained modest (1,500 to 2,000 copies), while the majority of the population was illiterate. However, this was enough to reach elites, who had the power to make decisions. In addition, the content of these books circulated through collective reading and conversation, preaching, and songs.

## Struggles for the honour of God

The writings of Luther (1483-1546), disseminated throughout Europe from 1517 onwards, probably represent the first editorial phenomenon in history. At the pinnacle of the dispute during the 1520s, the reformer wrote on average two opuscles per month. The reformers Zwingli (1484-1531) and Calvin (1509-1564) also relied on print to disseminate their message. In addition to biblical interpretation and catechisms, they published vehement attacks against the Roman Catholic Church. The *libelles* printed in Protestant lands were secretly circulated in Catholic states. At the beginning of the Reformation, Protestants frequently resorted to provocation. By posting texts and images at night, and by throwing them from windows or plastering them to the doors of priests, they hoped to provoke spiritual shock and to awaken consciences.

Beginning in the 1520s, the Catholic Church undertook a European counter-attack. The treatises of German, English, and Flemish doctors were published in Latin in Paris, alongside those of theologians from the Sorbonne. Catholic responses in the vernacular languages had to wait, for ecclesiastical authorities feared encouraging the engagement of laypersons in debates they did not fully understand, thereby contributing to the spread of heresy. The success of Protestantism, however, left them no choice. Parish priests and believers needed means for defending themselves. While the theological dispute remained the privileged domain of the clergy, numerous laypersons engaged in the fight by way of writing that denounced the blasphemies, practices, and crimes of heretics.

## The politicization of the debate

The engagement of believers in the religious debate politicized the conflict, especially in instances of disagreement between the sovereign and his subjects. In the Holy Roman Empire from the 1540s, and then in Scotland and France during the 1560s, Protestant jurists developed theories of legitimate resistance to tyrants. Accusations of tyranny and theoretical developments were offered in different forms of print—treatises, declarations, histories, dialogues, fictional letters, notices, battle narratives—that confronted and responded to one another. These writings were the work of both professionals in the service of the powerful, as well as occasional writers who wanted to show their zeal and know-how. This increase in polemical writing was often perceived by contemporaries as one of the origins of civil wars. In France, pacification edicts considered that reciprocal attacks on people's honour sparked and fuelled wars: they imposed the forgetting of past offences, and prohibited insults and defamatory *libelles*. Political authorities also tried to control publications by censoring and monitoring printers, even though public authorities were themselves a leading source of libels, which they commissioned in order to justify their actions.

## Objectives and means of persuasion

All of these writings sought to persuade the reader, provoke his or her conversion and political engagement, or on the contrary to alert them to indoctrination. The authors were not seeking large-scale support. They were first and foremost addressing an enlightened public that had the power to make decisions and take action, one which possessed a certain amount of public power, and was capable of leading the community. They also sought to create honourable conditions for an anticipated commitment by disseminating a positive and virtuous image of the cause defended in society.

The partisan use of print stimulated reflection on the conditions for effective political and pastoral writing. Polemicists, who were trained in the art of persuasion, applied the principles of rhetoric in their writings. They adapted their arguments and means of expression to the objective, target audience, and circumstances. This is why it was not uncommon to observe contradictory arguments

or examples in the writing of the same author or group of authors. Furthermore, political prudence authorized dissimulation, in an effort to attain the honourable objective which was the salvation of the political or religious community. For example, during the 1580s, Philippe Duplessis-Mornay, a Protestant counsellor of the future Henry IV of France, did not hesitate to pass as a moderate Catholic in order to better persuade this public.

Finally, a *texte de combat* [combative text] had to adapt to the culture of those to whom it was addressed. Most works were addressed to a lettered audience and included numerous scholarly references. Engravings, which were more widely spread in the Holy Roman Empire and the Netherlands than in France, were difficult as well, and were often accompanied by an explanatory text, or commented on in public. From the start of the conflict there were also reflections on how to instruct the humblest members of society in the truths needed for the salvation of the soul and the city. Luther used simple and familiar language in order to be understood by the largest possible audience. Calvinist poets composed songs to popular airs to facilitate the learning of central doctrinal points. Catholic authors responded with songs that condemned Protestant practices and beliefs, and recounted Catholic miracles and victories. Songs made it possible to more effectively memorize information, as well as to create a sense of belonging and promote engagement.

## International considerations

Libels were also a diplomatic consideration. Ambassadors had to combat the dissemination of print hostile to their sovereign and promote the truth regarding their prince. The stakes could be considerable. When he tried to be elected King of Poland in 1573, Henri de Valois was confronted by the suspicion of a partially Protestant kingdom. His rivals circulated libels accusing him of taking part in the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre. It took all of his ambassador Jean de Monluc's skill to convince Protestant nobles to support the French prince. *Libelles* could also incite people to intervene in the affairs of their neighbours. *The theatre of cruelty of the heretics of our time*, published in 1587 in Antwerp by Richard Verstegan, dramatized the persecution of English Catholics in order to encourage princes loyal to Rome, chief among them Philip II of Spain, to declare war against Elizabeth I.

During the sixteenth century, actual editorial campaigns were subsequently organized by political actors to justify their acts, defend their religion, and edify their subjects and believers. It is difficult to describe them as propaganda operations, as in most cases they were in fact short-term actions guided by erudite and targeted strategies of persuasion. They also varied greatly depending on political circumstances and translated into numerically small publications. Yet these actions were amplified by the engagement of printers and occasional writers, who seized upon debates and helped created public spheres of discussion.

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