

The St Bartholomew's Day Massacre: The Mysteries of a Crime of State

Review Number: 1463

Publish date: Thursday, 15 August, 2013

Author: Arlette Jouanna

ISBN: 9780719088315

Date of Publication: 2013

Price: £65.00

Pages: 320pp.

Publisher: Manchester University Press

Publisher url: <http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9780719088315>

Place of Publication: Manchester

Reviewer: Barbara Diefendorf

This is a welcome translation of an important book. Arlette Jouanna's studies of the French nobility in its relations with the monarchy and the 16th-century Wars of Religion give her the breadth of vision and contextual knowledge necessary to offer new insights into perhaps the single most famous event of these wars. She has found an able translator in Joseph Bergin, a prominent historian of early modern religious history, who has produced a translation as fluid and vigorous as the original.

The French edition was part of a remake of a series focused on key events in French history and on their long-term significance. As such, the book was intended for a broad audience. It is not, however, a mere synthesis or popularization of previous scholarship and is based on a careful reappraisal of both secondary literature and primary sources, including some manuscript sources largely overlooked by previous scholars. The only historiography it engages directly is French, perhaps because it was intended primarily for a French audience. The notes, however, show thoughtful assimilation of a wider literature. Moreover, although she rejects key elements of the interpretations of the Massacre recently offered by Jean-Louis Bourgeon and Denis Crouzet, Jouanna borrows usefully from them to arrive at an interpretation that, while incorporating much that will be familiar to scholars in the field, is distinctive and original.⁽¹⁾

The book opens with a description of the slaughter that commenced in Paris on 24 August 1572 but then doubles back to tell how the celebrations surrounding the marriage of the royal princess, Marguerite de Valois, to Henri de Bourbon, King of Navarre, the previous week were characterized by the theme of unity and concord. How, Jouanna asks, can we explain this sudden reversal? This is the first of three 'enigmas' around which the book is framed (p. 11). The second is the question of how to reconcile the king's decision to execute the Huguenot leadership with his explicit desire, maintained even after the massacre, to preserve the edict of pacification that had ended the third War of Religion in August 1570. The third enigma is why the attempted execution of the Huguenot leadership degenerated into a more generalized massacre that persisted despite attempts to call a halt and spread beyond Paris to other French cities. All three questions are important, but the second broaches most directly Jouanna's broader thesis that the Massacre's long-term importance lay in its contribution to two contrasting developments: the articulation of 'reason-of-state' arguments supporting royal absolutism and the long process of secularization made possible by the

conceptualization of autonomous political and religious spheres.

As might be expected, Jouanna sets the Massacre in the context of France's religious quarrels. Emphasizing the tension between the passions aroused in the Wars of Religion and the requirement explicit in the 1570 pacification edict to act as if the conflicts had never occurred, she stresses the difficulty of renouncing the desire for vengeance stoked by the brutality of the fighting. At the same time, she acknowledges that only this policy of 'voluntary amnesia' could 'break the dreadful spiral of violence' (p. 20). Incorporating recent research on the extraordinary efforts made by the commissioners Charles IX sent out to oversee the peace, she revises exaggerated notions of the ineffectiveness of his reign, while conceding that the commissioners' efforts were often frustrated. Despite the failures, these efforts to make peace work support her argument that Charles was doing everything possible to reconcile his divided subjects. In contrast to Denis Crouzet, who locates Charles's desire for concord in the Neoplatonic philosophy that penetrated his court, Jouanna sees the king's efforts to ensure peace as more strategic than philosophical, but none the less real for that. The characteristic that emerges most strongly in her portrait of Charles is his extreme touchiness and desire to have his authority respected, a need that prompted him 'to declare on every possible occasion that he was the sovereign and that his orders should be implemented' (p. 28).

This characteristic, introduced in the context of attempts to enforce the 1570 peace, foreshadows Jouanna's explanation of Charles's order two years later to execute the Huguenot military leaders, whom he saw as a threat to both peace and his sovereign authority. As she explains it, the issue that prompted the king abruptly to terminate attempts to conciliate the Huguenots and turn murderously against them was the aggressive stance they took when a sharpshooter tried to assassinate their leader, Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, on 22 August 1572. Addressing the inevitable question of who was behind the attack, she dismisses all of the usual candidates. Queen Mother Catherine de Medici, was too heavily committed to peace to so abruptly reverse her course, as was Charles IX. The Guises, although leaders of the ultra-Catholic faction in the wars and long-time enemies of Coligny, were in too 'fragile' a position in court to risk angering the king (p. 79). Jouanna also dismisses the idea that Philip II of Spain had Coligny killed so as to prevent Charles IX from coming to the aid of Protestant rebels in the southern Netherlands. Philip was convinced, she argues, that if Coligny had gone to the aid of the rebels, Charles would disavow his efforts so as to avoid open warfare. It was thus not necessary to kill him to prevent the revolt from escalating into an international war between France and Spain (p. 62).

After ruling out the usual candidates, Jouanna offers a new take on the assassination attempt. Contemporaries just assumed that someone powerful had to be behind it, but we should also consider other possibilities. Who most wanted to 'scuttle the peace' celebrated with the wedding? For Jouanna, the answer is clear: radical Catholics in Paris; 'the murderous fury of the most inflamed Catholics of Paris was incitement enough to the authors of such an enterprise' (p. 83). She does not attempt to identify more specifically the responsible parties and instead sketches out a picture of religious zeal and cumulative grievances on the part of Parisian Catholics that, she argues, culminated in a determination to exterminate not only the admiral but also every hope of peace. Extinguishing the possibility of peace is a key point here. For Jouanna, the attack on Coligny was less an attempt to deprive the Huguenots of their leader, as it has usually been portrayed, than a deliberate provocation intended to plunge France back into a war that would result in the final extermination of heresy. Implicating the Guises in the assassination attempt by employing individuals connected with them in its execution was, by this logic, intended to stoke the Huguenots' desire for revenge and prompt reprisals that would destroy the king's hopes for reconciliation.

Charles's anger on first learning of the assassination attempt was thus sincere. It was, moreover, only increased by the Protestant leaders' reactions and the demands they made. Charles had forced himself to suppress his distrust of the Huguenots in the interest of peace but could do so no longer. Jouanna cites sources alleging that Coligny had used threatening language in trying to persuade Charles IX to go war in Flanders but insists that Charles 'had kept his resentment under control' (p. 100) in the interest of peace up until 23 August, when Coligny's strident words and those of his supporters 'attacked the king's dignity' (p. 101) in ways he could not tolerate. The language Protestant leaders employed when demanding justice for

the ambush ‘amounted to a denial of royal sovereignty’ (p. 101).

The royal council decided on the night of 23 August to kill the Protestant leaders as a direct response to these threats. Coligny appeared more than ever an ‘over-mighty and potentially dangerous subject to the king’ – the ‘uncontrollable leader of a private army and member of a dissenting church, [whose] authority rivaled the king’s’ (p. 101). Although admitting that rumors circulating in Paris might have provoked a sense of panic on the part of the king and council, Jouanna discounts suggestions that they acted to ward off an immediate attack by the Huguenots. This, she insists, was largely a justification drummed up after the fact to justify the recourse to sudden action. Even if not anticipating an immediate attack, the council was convinced that the Huguenot leaders posed a threat to the king’s majesty and to the state and, as such, considered recourse to ‘extraordinary justice’ necessary. There were too many armed Protestant nobles in the tense capital for ‘ordinary justice’ – the arrest and trial of the Huguenot leaders – to seem possible.

The ‘extraordinary justice’ meted out to the Protestant leaders as a result of the council’s order must thus remain separate from the popular killings that followed. Jouanna agrees with other recent analyses of the Massacre that long-festered fear and hatred on the part of Parisian Catholics catalyzed into a willingness to kill when Guise was heard telling his soldiers to go on with their killing because it was the king’s command. This gave people ‘the unexpected legitimation of their murderous intentions’ (p. 128). The popular massacres were, moreover, not mere mob violence but rather ‘war for the purification of territory’ (p. 133). Charles’s insistence on concord had de-legitimized him among intransigent Catholics. Authorizing the killing of Protestants re-legitimized him briefly, but when he issued orders for the killing to stop, the people disobeyed him to take up ‘the cause of God and of the community’ (p. 139). The Guises and other ultra-Catholics at court could, Jouanna believes, have brought the killings to a stop but instead let them happen, knowing they would not have to take responsibility for them. ‘It was now the people who exercised *their* extraordinary justice’ (p. 141; italics in the original).

The council’s decision on 23 August to resort to ‘extraordinary justice’ and kill the Huguenot leaders might have been taken in a moment of panic and certainly was taken without thinking through all possible consequences. The argument that the king had a right to resort to extraordinary means to protect the state when faced with imminent danger nevertheless became the foundation of Charles’s explanation and defense of this decision at home and abroad, although, as Jouanna points out, the defense did not extend to the generalized massacres, for which the king never accepted responsibility. Inherent in this defense was a separation of politics from religion: the Huguenot leaders were killed as rebels and not as members of a dissident church. This separation of politics from religion, in which Jouanna sees an incipient logic of ‘reason of state’, explains why Charles could insist, initially at least, that he wanted the edict of pacification maintained. This proved, of course, a futile hope. Not only did Protestants who escaped the Massacre prepare for war, but Catholic intransigents, experiencing a ‘new vigor’ after the Massacre (p. 173), pressured Charles to complete the eradication of heresy that, in their minds, he had begun.

Jouanna discusses the trauma produced by the Massacre, noting that ‘divine wrath’ was the most common explanation cited by both sides to explain the horror of these events (p. 181). She is most interested, however, in the political explanations that were offered. Her discussion of Protestant resistance theory and the denunciations of tyranny expressed by the ‘monarchomachs’ will be familiar to early modernists, but she makes good use of this discussion to advance her argument that the Massacre ended all hope for a ‘kingdom of love’ (p. 204) in which it was simply assumed that the king would respect the people’s liberties without recourse to a written constitution. She also makes a strong argument that the alliance between Protestants and moderate Catholics that emerged after the Massacre in the Malcontents was rooted in a common aversion to tyranny and desire for institutional reform. The Malcontents were, she argues, united by a belief that the Massacre was at its heart a plot to destroy the great nobility by turning its leaders against one another, so that they could not stand as a check to royal power. The fifth War of Religion, provoked by the Malcontent alliance in 1575, was thus ‘profoundly different from’ (p. 216) and more political in character than the ones that preceded it.

The need to keep the book focused on Saint Bartholomew's Day forces Jouanna to telescope the later religious wars into a very brief summary, which she uses to reinforce her overall thesis. She explains how the Malcontents' success in the fifth war boomeranged against them when the 1576 Estates General, called in hopes of reform, resulted instead in a resurgence of Catholic intransigence and loss of Huguenot gains. It also ended hopes for balancing royal authority with an increased role for the Estates by showing that the assembly could be more dangerous than the king. Rather than inspiring confidence in representative assemblies, the later wars persuaded people of the need for a transcendent authority. Jouanna concludes, then, that the Massacre played a direct role in promoting acceptance of absolutism in France. Catholic publicists who depicted Charles IX as a martyr who gave his life to fight heresy after his death from tuberculosis in May 1574 played a part in this by contributing to a 'super-sacralisation' of the royal person that Jouanna identifies also in Henri IV's identification of himself as an instrument of divine providence in the Edict of Nantes. But if the edict reinforced royal absolutism, it also sanctioned a separation of religious and secular spheres. The long-term impact of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre lies in its contribution to these disparate processes – a reinforcement of absolutism but also a laying of the foundations for secularisation of the state.

Jouanna's argument is well supported by evidence and in most respects persuasive. At several points, however, it fails to answer old questions or raises new ones. The supposition that radical Catholics in Paris were behind the initial attempt to kill Coligny is plausible but not proved and seems to rest largely on the elimination of other candidates. And while I must agree with Jouanna about the explosive situation in the capital on the eve of the Massacre (my work on the subject is frequently cited in her notes), I fail to see how this atmosphere of unrest congealed into an organized plot against the admiral's life.⁽²⁾ Who among the city's radical Catholics would have wanted (or dared) to orchestrate a plot that tried to pin the assassination on the Guises? And why would Maurevert, the man known to have wielded the gun, have lent himself to such a conspiracy? He had his own quarrels with Coligny, but Jouanna thinks the logistics of the event 'indicate that it was not a simple private matter' (p. 75). Described as 'relatively wealthy' and 'an adventurer choosing his camp in terms of his immediate interests' (p. 74), Maurevert was neither in need of money nor committed to the ultra-Catholic cause. He was, moreover, a client of the Guises at the time of the Massacre, as were several individuals who facilitated his escape. Jouanna considers these connections so obvious as to disqualify the Guises themselves from the attempt, but just who in Paris would have been able to use – and betray – these ties of clientage remains a puzzle. Unless new evidence appears – and that is unlikely – the question of who tried to kill Coligny will remain open to debate.

Jouanna's explanation of the abrupt shift from conciliating the Huguenots to ordering their leaders slain also leaves questions unanswered. One can easily imagine the hyper-sensitive Charles IX losing his temper in the face of the threatening language allegedly employed by Huguenot leaders demanding justice after the attempt to assassinate Coligny. But Jouanna stresses the collective nature of the decision to order the leaders slain, and it is harder to comprehend why the royal council agreed that the angry words of men reeling from the attack on their leader posed such an urgent danger to the state that those men needed to be summarily killed. Jouanna does not think that the council believed the Huguenots were planning an immediate coup, but if there was no imminent danger, why did its members agree that the machinery of 'ordinary justice' – arrest and trial – offered inadequate protection? Jouanna cites the high levels of emotion in Paris and large number of Protestant nobles who remained in the city as reasons for resorting to 'extraordinary justice', but was there really good reason to believe that nobles who had gathered in Paris for a wedding would have – could have – suddenly mobilized to attack the king in his palace if he arrested their leaders? Were there no calm heads on the council? What about Catherine de Medici? Jouanna is right that Catherine has been too quickly blamed for the Massacre by many past historians, but she almost disappears from this account. Did she, like Charles, really think they could maintain the peace by announcing that the Huguenot leaders were killed as rebels and not as religious dissidents? Should we really abandon the more traditional explanation that, far from hoping to maintain the peace, the council recognized that a new war was inevitable and decided to weaken the Huguenots' leadership as much as possible before that war began? These questions cannot be

answered with certainty, given that all explanations of the order to kill the Huguenot leaders were made after the fact and with the intention of justifying it. Descriptions of the Huguenots' threatening demeanor are unreliable for the same reason; they were intended to prove that the slain leaders deserved their fate. Despite the complexities and contradictions inherent in the evidence, Arlette Jouanna has pieced together a powerful argument about the motives for and meanings of the Massacre. Some of 'the mysteries of a crime of state' must nevertheless remain unresolved.

Notes

1. Jean-Louis Bourgeon, *L'assassinat de Coligny* (Geneva, 1992); idem, *Charles IX devant la Saint-Barthélemy* (Geneva, 1995); Denis Crouzet, *La nuit de la Saint-Barthélemy: Un rêve perdu de la Renaissance* (Paris, 1994); and idem, *Le haut cœur de Catherine de Médicis: Une raison politique aux temps de la Saint-Barthélemy* (Paris, 2005).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Barbara B. Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (New York, NY, and Oxford, 1991).[Back to \(2\)](#)

Source URL:<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1463>

Links

[\[1\] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/55209](https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/55209)