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"The Seine Ran Red With Blood": Developments in Protestant Propaganda Before and After the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre

Samantha Rauer

There exist certain landmark dates in history which appear on countless timelines and history books; the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre is among these. In this essay, I seek to show how Protestant propaganda changed after the Massacre of Saint Bartholomew and to suggest what this shift implies about the Huguenot community as a whole. Although scholars have confirmed the importance of reactions to the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, less attention has been paid to how it altered the nature and function of Protestant propaganda. I would argue that Huguenot propaganda became sharply more aggressive after Saint Bartholomew's Day. The anger sparked by its horrific violence was very much reflected in the propaganda campaign that followed. The violence of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre did not only provoke powerful reactions; it turned the Protestant printing industry into a vehicle for violence. In the process, the Huguenot voice transformed from a subtle and informative appeal for solidarity into a blatant and passionate call for action.

In order to understand the nature of French Protestant propaganda in the years prior to the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, it is crucial to recognize the climate of fear under which it operated. One event in particular led to the suppression of Huguenot

printed works – The Affair of the Placards. On the morning of October 17, 1534, anti-Catholic posters suddenly appeared throughout Paris, Blois, Rouen, Tours and Orléans. Their content attacked the Catholic Eucharist with a headline that read “TRUE ARTICLES ON THE HORRIBLE, GROSS AND INSUFFERABLE ABUSES OF THE PAPAL MASS.”¹ After this event, the previously conciliatory King Francis I abandoned his attempts to protect Protestants in France. Protestant sympathizers were sent to the Châtelet prison, and leaders such as John Calvin fled to Geneva. Hostility between Catholics and Protestants increased greatly over the next three decades. Catholics believed Huguenots to be immoral, a danger to community, and therefore intolerable. Threatened by the other’s attacks, both groups took to aggression in self-defense.² Throughout this period, French Protestant propaganda was suppressed by the Catholic majority. As a result, Huguenot printed works did not focus so much on attacking Catholics as they did on nurturing the Protestant community.

The French situation contrasts with that of Germany where Protestant propaganda circulated freely and Evangelical cities prohibited Catholic publications. In the German-speaking world, propaganda found power in the masses. The German peasantry was attracted to the easily accessible and digestible pamphlets. In addition, Evangelical pamphlets were usually simple and cheap, allowing for fast production

¹ Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 18.

² Barbara Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991): 50-64.

and distribution. Mark Edwards refers to this entire process as the "West's first large-scale media campaign."³ In France, Huguenots did not enjoy the support of the masses; rather, they were a repressed minority. Protestant printing could not compete with Catholic propaganda which had the full support of the mainstream printing industry.⁴ Repressive legislature took a no-toleration approach towards printing, selling or even owning heretical literature.⁵ Since French Protestants risked imprisonment if caught, they depended upon a more secure and tightly knit system for sharing ideas and material.

Early Huguenot printing relied upon a clandestine network of printers and booksellers. The printing community was a reflection of the larger underground Protestant network present in Paris prior to Saint Bartholomew's Day. The ties associated with the book trade gave Huguenots in Paris a means of communication and a level of emotional support. Before the massacre, most Parisian Protestants preferred to do business with one another, whether borrowing money or seeking legal advice. There existed an understood sense of mutual service. Parisian booksellers illegally imported forbidden literature from Protestant cities. For some, this risky business was a way of "living out

³ Mark Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994): 21-39.

⁴ Luc Racaut, *Hatred in Print: Catholic Propaganda and Protestant Identity During the French Wars of Religion* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002): 21.

⁵ Donald R. Kelley, 'Martyrs, Myths, and the Massacre: The Background of St. Bartholomew', *The American Historical Review* (December 1972): 1329.

their faith.”⁶ Most book-smugglers simultaneously operated another legitimate publishing business. The most frequently distributed material included copies of the New Testament, the Psalms, and Jean Crespin’s *Histoire des Martyrs*.⁷

The bible held special importance for Catholics and Protestants alike during the Reformation. Both groups agreed on the authority of scripture; they disagreed over interpretation. Catholics believed that the pope or ecumenical council had the right to interpret scripture, while Martin Luther campaigned for the self-evident truths of “Scripture alone.”⁸ Presses in Geneva are said to have fueled the French Reformation by printing bibles.⁹ In 1559, Genevan editors Nicolas Barbier and Thomas Courteau produced a miniature octavo bible measuring only 190 by 125 millimeters. These tiny bibles were structured to provide lessons; they contained tables as well as an index, annotations, chapter summaries, maps and illustrations. They instructed the growing Huguenot community on how to worship properly. Historian Francis Higman shows how they also might have served as a manual for aspiring Calvinist pastors in France.¹⁰ Despite the availability of such bibles, it was often the illiterate who converted most readily. This explains the significance of the psalms, which were able to reach a much broader

⁶ Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 134.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁸ Edwards, *Printing*, 109.

⁹ Racaut, *Hatred*, 79.

¹⁰ Francis Higman, “Without Great Effort and With Pleasure: Sixteenth-Century Genevan Bibles and Reading Practices”, *The Bible as Book: The Reformation*, ed. Orlaith O’Sullivan (New Castle, Del: Oak Knoll Press, 2000): 116-21.

audience than the literate public.

The Psalms were of great importance to Parisian Huguenots especially. Altogether, some thirty different Protestant presses produced about 35,000 Calvinist Psalters a year.¹¹ Since Calvinists were suspicious of woodcuts and images, versified Psalms provided an alternative method of communicating their beliefs to the illiterate.¹² Popular psalms included Clément Marot's *Cinquante psaumes* and Théodore Beza's *Octante-trois psaumes*. In 1558, Henri II made the public singing of psalms illegal. The prohibition of these pieces appears to have made them even more sacred to Protestants, who continued to sing them as an act of protest.¹³ John Calvin encouraged the singing of psalms and provided eight versifications himself. These were published collectively in 1539 as *Aulcuns pseaulmes et cantiques mys en chant*.¹⁴ Calvin also made reference to the Psalms in several of his writings. He used them to inspire and comfort fellow Protestants and address their suffering. In his letters to the Reformed Church in Paris written in 1557, Calvin referred to psalm 56 and 57. The first reads "Yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast." The next assures believers "If God sometimes allows the blood of his faithful to be spilled, he nevertheless carefully collects their precious tears."¹⁵ Calvin sympathized with the persecution of the Huguenots, and used the Psalms to

¹¹ Francis Higman, "Music", *The Reformation World*, ed. Andrew Pettegree (New York: Routledge, 2000): 500.

¹² Racaut, *Hatred*, 42.

¹³ Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 137.

¹⁴ Higman, "Music", 497.

¹⁵ Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 138.

assure them of their own salvation. Before the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, this type of literature functioned to encourage faith; and a collective sense of faith was important for keeping the French Huguenot network alive. While the octavo bibles were instructional, the psalms were oftentimes inspirational.

Another type of early Protestant literature which played off the early suffering of the Huguenots was the martyrology. Jean Crespin’s *Histoire des Martyrs* best exemplifies this genre. The first edition of *Histoire* was published in 1554 out of Geneva. In it, Crespin recalled the deaths of individuals who had suffered under the Valois monarchy. His discussion of individual martyrdom was crucial because it helped develop the image of the innocent Protestant victim. Huguenots continued to portray themselves as victims even when they engaged in armed rebellion.¹⁶ The myth of the innocent martyr was a fundamental part of building French Protestant culture. Just like the psalms, stories of martyrdom would have inspired a collective sense of faith among this oppressed Huguenot community.

Protestant printing before the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre consisted also of images. Since Calvinist beliefs opposed the use of religious imagery, such prints were less common than the bibles, psalms, and martyrologies. The *Quarante Tabeaux ou histories diverses qui sont memorables touchant les Geurres, Massacres et troubles advenus en France en ces dernieres annees* was a series of image prints published out of Geneva from 1569 to 1570 by Jean Perrissin and Jacques Tortorel. [fig. 1] One of the most

¹⁶ Racaut, *Hatred*, 68.

striking things about these prints is that they depict violence against Catholics, as well as Protestants. The artistic representations of events are very accurate and seem more like historical documentation than propaganda.¹⁷ Their subtle nature likely resulted from the environment of censorship in France. In the series preface, the artists assured that the images were accurate and reliable historical representations.¹⁸ Like the octavo bibles, the prints sought to educate. Whether French Protestant works were restrained like the *Quarante Tableaux* or clandestine like other propaganda, the pieces still sought to be a source of information and hope. Since the Huguenots in France were a young and oppressed society of believers, they depended upon this material to sustain community. The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre would intensify the Huguenot voice and greatly increase public awareness of their presence.

The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre refers to the slaughter of Protestants who had gathered in Paris for the marriage of Marguerite de Valois and Henri de Bourbon, a Catholic princess and a Huguenot leader. What had been initially planned to be a ceremonial symbol of peace between Catholics and Protestants, ended in massacre that day. Legend implies that Catherine de'Médicis helped orchestrate this mass murder of Protestants. She had supposedly been threatened by her son King Charles IX's friendship with Gaspard de Coligny, the Grand Admiral of France

¹⁷ Philip Benedict, Lawrence M. Bryant and Kristen B. Neuschel, 'Graphic History: What Readers Knew and Were Taught in the *Quarante Tableaux* of Perrissin and Tortorel' *French Historical Studies* (Spring 2005): 185.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 'Graphic History', 184.

and leader of the Huguenot party.¹⁹ Fearing Coligny would influence her son, she plotted his assassination. However, after the Admiral was shot but not killed, Catherine anticipated a Protestant backlash and therefore ordered a grand massacre to take place. The morning of August 24 1572, the slaughter began. Eyewitness accounts tell of the vicious murder of innocents,²⁰ and legend claims that the Seine “ran red with blood.”²¹ The massacre lasted for three days in Paris. In the following weeks, news of the event traveled throughout the French provinces and a string of additional massacres ensued.²²

The massacre immediately triggered dramatic reactions from both sides of this religious divide. Catholics claimed the massacre was a necessary measure. The Church and the French government attempted to defend the Catholic identity of France and issued official explanations for the event. One royalist defended the Catholics, saying “there is no gallows, cross, or torture severe enough to punish the crime of a traitor or rebel.”²³ Meanwhile, Protestants “screamed bloody murder.” Depending on the sources, death-counts varied from 50,000 to 300,000.²⁴ Huguenot survivors of the tragedy gave graphic accounts of

¹⁹ Henri Nogueres, *Massacre of Saint Bartholomew* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1962): 30-1.

²⁰ Kelley, ‘Martyrs’, 1338.

²¹ Alex Karmel, *A Corner in the Marais*, (Jaffrey, NH: David R. Godine Publisher, 1998): 58.

²² Raymond A. Mentzer, “The French Wars of Religion”, *The Reformation World*, ed. Andrew Pettegree (New York: Routledge, 2000): 331.

²³ Kelley, ‘Martyrs’, 1339.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

the mutilation of bodies. Their narrative of events consistently portrayed Catholics as sadistic murderers and Protestants as their innocent victims.²⁵ Accounts of the massacre carried a certain shock value which allowed for a more sensational form of propaganda than before²⁶. Huguenot propagandists took advantage of the magnitude of the tragedy, seeking to immortalize it. Works such as Simon Goulart's historical narrative entitled *Mémoires* were meant to sear the event into Protestant memory. Goulart insisted on that point:

The memory of the massacres committed in several cities of France in the months of August and September of 1572, engraved in the hearts of an infinite number of men, made many wish that the treachery of the authors of these massacres not remain hidden in the shadows of forgetfulness and that the executioners of these abominable cruelties be punished as they deserved.²⁷

The atrocities of the massacre caused both horror and a new determination within the Protestant community. Many Huguenots reacted with defiance and a willingness to fight to the death for their religion.²⁸

The massacre both changed the attitude of French Protestants and altered the nature of their community. There was no longer a concentration of Huguenots in Paris after Saint Bartholomew's Day. The surviving

²⁵ Robert Kingdon, *Myths About the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacres, 1572-1576* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988): 37-8.

²⁶ Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 102.

²⁷ Kingdon, *Myths*, 4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, *Myths*, 49.

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Protestants in France were often imprisoned and given the choice between death and conversion to Catholicism. Some converts ended up fleeing for refuge and then reverting back to Protestantism; others remained Catholics permanently, preferring to stay safely in France.²⁹ Some Huguenots stayed within France but moved to the Protestant refuges of Sancerre and La Rochelle. Finally, Huguenots also dispersed to completely new locations. In the months following the massacre, many fled to safer areas, carrying news of the massacre. A tidal wave of immigrants travelled to Geneva to join Calvin and his network; others went even farther afield, to England, Germany, or anywhere there was a Protestant community to join. The disintegration of the Parisian Huguenot community occurred around the same time that the printing wars also came to be less centralized in Paris. The growth of other provincial printing centers within France contributed to Paris's diminished reputation as a publishing capital, as did the emergence of French printing presses outside of the country. Control over Parisian printing no longer meant dominance over the distribution of printed material within France.³⁰ Thus, after Saint Bartholomew's Day, French Protestants no longer depended on the underground bookseller network which had fostered the subdued tone of previous propaganda. Moreover, the movement of Huguenots after the massacre also encouraged the internationalization of French Protestant printing.

²⁹ Ibid., *Myths*, 47-8.

³⁰ Andrew Pettegree “The Sixteenth-Century Religious Book Project”, *The Sixteenth-Century Religious Book*, ed. Philip Conner, Paul Nelles and Andrew Pettegree (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001): 14-15.

The massacre quickly caught the attention of the global Protestant population. At first, lack of efficient international communication caused the story to be vague. Word of mouth transmitted the general idea, but specifics remained blurry.³¹ Within months, however, Huguenots relocated to new locations and contributed crucial details to the discussion of the massacre beyond Paris. This allowed Protestants outside of France and Geneva to contribute printed responses to the event. Strasbourg, the German Protestant center of printing, produced much propaganda regarding the massacre. In the wake of Saint Bartholomew's Day, Strasbourg had openly welcomed French refugees into its territory, including many educated men who provided information and material for "massacre pamphlets."³² French refugees also fled to London, the Channel Islands and the southern coast of England.³³ Paradoxically, the international attention given to the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre created a greater sense of unity in the Protestant movement and strengthened the Huguenot voice both inside and outside France. The movement of Huguenots across Europe allowed Protestant material to be more widely shared. In the years following the massacre, Protestant works of propaganda were printed in much greater numbers than before,³⁴ translated frequently, and reached a larger number of international readers. The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre became the central focus of Protestant literature.

³¹ Noguères, *The Massacre*, 147.

³² Kingdon, *Myths*, 18.

³³ *Ibid.*, *Myths*, 20-1.

³⁴ Kelley, 'Martyrs', 1340.

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Often, descriptions of the massacre, which caught the attention of readers, were then used to communicate an underlying message.

Closer examination of the piece *Reveille-Matin* especially reveals the intent behind some of the propaganda concerning Saint Bartholomew’s Day. The pamphlet’s full title was *Le reveille-matin des François et de leurs voisins*, meaning “Call to awakening for Frenchmen and their neighbors”. As the title suggests, the piece was intended for an international audience. It referenced contemporary events in the Netherlands, Spain, Italy and the Swiss Cantons, clearly anticipating a broad audience. Historians believe several authors contributed to the text, which consisted of historical narrative, stories, poems, prayers, and political analysis. *Reveille-Matin* attacked the French royals, especially Catherine de Médicis, and encouraged Huguenots to move towards active rebellion. Most importantly, the pamphlet used the massacre to inspire sympathy. *Reveille-Matin* particularly stressed the tragic nature of the event and looked to other nations for protection. Massacre pamphlets not only called upon French Protestants to take action; they sought to attract international attention and support. The authors proposed that Protestant countries form a “general league” or grand alliance against the Catholics, something many hoped for but had yet to see.³⁵ Historians have suggested that *Reveille-Matin* and other similar pieces sought to keep the memory of the massacre alive, even to the point of exploiting it.³⁶ The defiant nature of this material reflected the shift in

³⁵ Kingdon, *Myths*, 76.

³⁶ Kingdon, *Myths*, 86.

Huguenot thought which occurred after Saint Bartholomew's Day³⁷.

Within the Huguenot community in France, discussion of martyrs reflected a changing attitude among French Protestants. While previous martyr literature had stressed the victimized, passive nature of martyrs, the new rhetoric admired active rebellion. In *Right of Magistrates*, Beza wrote:

[W]e must honor martyrs not only those who have conquered without resistance, and by patience only, against tyrants who have persecuted the truth, but those also who, authorized by law and by competent authorities, devoted their strength to the defense of the true religion.³⁸

Huguenots saw persecution as a trial from God; the Saint Bartholomew's Day martyrs were embraced as a source of pride and strength because they had suffered for their faith.³⁹ Victims were mythologized and used as examples. Most striking was General Coligny, whose assassination became a central feature of massacre pamphlets and books. In *Mémoires*, Simon Goulart depicted Coligny as fearless in the face of death. The martyr story of Coligny helped focus the attention of the relatively young Huguenot community, which had previously lacked its own myths or legends. The massacre also caused Protestants to memorialize groups of martyrs apart from the Saint Bartholomew's

³⁷ Donald R. Kelley, *The Beginning of Ideology: Consciousness and Society in the French Reformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981): 301.

³⁸ Kelley, 'Martyrs', 1340.

³⁹ Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross*, 143.

Day victims. Goulart’s edition of *Histoire des Martyrs*, for example, specifically addressed entire martyr communities. This was a definite shift from the earlier *Histoire* published by Jean Crespin which had focused on individuals.⁴⁰ The persecuted cities of Sancerre and La Rochelle were cited as primary examples of martyr groups and were mentioned by several other authors. *The Histoire Mémorable de la Ville de Sancerre*, written by Jean de Lérg in 1574, is noteworthy for its dramatic account of the siege of Sancerre.⁴¹ This new focus on groups instead of individuals may have reflected the evolution of faith from private to public. Furthermore, this post-massacre martyr rhetoric suggests a new, more collective and open defense of French Protestantism. Instead of seeking to comfort the oppressed, these stories sought to rouse Protestants to joint action.

Not only did the massacre create a new determination within the Huguenot community, but also a more cynical outlook. This had a direct effect on the artistic and intellectual mood of the French Protestant population. Certain historians have gone as far as to relate the massacre with the emergence of the baroque artistic movement in France. French Protestant poet Agrippa d’Aubigné exemplifies the Huguenot artistic voice which surfaced after the massacre. His notably baroque works featured violent imagery and the theme of sacrifice— a sharp departure from the informative nature of earlier pieces. *Les tragiques* particularly embodies Agrippa’s approach. Penned in 1589, this epic poem condemned the royal family in a prophetic manner, describing Catholic violence at length and in

⁴⁰ Kingdon, *Myths*, 51.

⁴¹ Kingdon, *Myths*, 53.

detail.⁴² Like d'Aubigné, Huguenot intellectuals also adopted an openly critical discourse concerning the monarchy and the concept of sovereignty. The French Protestant cause became much more philosophically defined after Saint Bartholomew's Day.⁴³ Whereas previous literature had consisted mainly of scripture and psalms, these new Huguenot pieces were less religiously focused.⁴⁴ While they still sought to spread ideas and foster the Protestant community, later authors were much more politically rebellious.

The politicization of French Protestant propaganda was one of the most important consequences of Saint Bartholomew's Day. Huguenots generally became much more forceful in their anti-monarchical views after that traumatic event. They were moved to rethink their political position, disgusted by a government which would permit such atrocities to occur⁴⁵. As a result, multiple theories for resistance appeared. Several influential and eloquent Huguenot voices emerged to voice this opinion and suggest plans for change. *Reveille-Matin* has already been discussed as representative of the Protestant attack on nobility; other pieces expanded upon its themes. In *Francogallia*, François Hotman stressed the historical traditions supporting an elective monarchy and a national assembly, pointing out that France's current framework called for a revival of these traditions. Théodore Beza's *Right of Magistrates* similarly discussed the implicit contract between a king and his

⁴² Nadine Kuperty-Tsu, 'Religious Turmoil and Aesthetics of the French Renaissance', *Poetics Today* (Spring 2007): 133.

⁴³ Kelley, *Ideology*, 308.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, *Ideology*, 308-309.

⁴⁵ Mentzer, "Wars", 333.

people. If the contract was violated, the ruler should be overthrown.⁴⁶ These pieces exemplify the Huguenots' collective cry for change. Catherine de Médicis became the target of French Protestant political propaganda. [fig. 2] The most comprehensive example was a biography entitled *Marvelous Discourse on the Life, Actions, and Misconduct of Catherine de Médicis, Queen Mother*. Although the author remains unknown, at least ten editions appeared between 1575 and 1576, in Latin, French, German and English. *The Life* portrayed Catherine as a “picture and example of tyranny in its public manifestations” and a ferocious animal who “holds us between her paws”.⁴⁷ Bold enough to condemn the Queen mother of France, the Huguenot voice had clearly evolved from its earlier form.

The printed response to the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre demonstrates the extent of power that one legendary event can have over a group of people and their discourse. The discreet, informational and internally focused nature of previous propaganda was replaced by open criticism of the French monarchy and a direct call to action. The international expansion of the French Protestant community enabled the Huguenot voice to reach a wider audience and express feelings of repulsion. Instead of speaking to the repressed community within Paris, propaganda sought to reach the global Protestant population. The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre evolved into a Protestant myth that could mobilize and advance the Huguenot community. As a result, the French Protestant voice was forever changed. Huguenots inside and outside of

⁴⁶ Ibid., “Wars”, 333.

⁴⁷ Kingdon, *Myths*, 203.

France channeled their energy into a newly cynical and forceful campaign of words and images. The sharp contrast between this campaign and printed works before the massacre shows how, after 1572, the Huguenot voice assumed a more defiant tone and called for political action.

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