Factors of the Violence of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre

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The French Wars of Religion were characterized by immense violence between the Catholics and the Protestants. On August 24, 1572, following the marriage of King Charles IX's Catholic sister Marguerite of Valois to the Protestant King Henri of Navarre¹ commenced several days of indiscriminate killing by the Catholic popular masses of the Protestants living in Paris. The massacre in Paris then sparked similar action in the provinces of France that continued for months after the initial massacre.² The violence was influenced by political, social, cultural and religious factors. For the purpose of this paper the definitions of social, political, cultural and religious factors that will be used are as follows. Social factors and influences refer to the social status of the people through their material wealth. This looks at class differences such as the nobility versus the popular masses. Political factors would include violence done out of intent to further a political cause or as an effort to protect political power. Political factors can also refer to the smaller politics of the popular masses. Cultural factors take into account the cultural view of the world people living at the time had and how they viewed certain issues, such as how to deal with heresy. Religious factors refer to the religious divide in France between the Protestants and the Catholics. Looking specifically at the events of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, these lenses of social, political, cultural, and religious approaches can be used to study why the violence reached such drastic levels. Though there are many different approaches, the most important approach to studying why the massacre became so violent is the political motivations of both the nobility and lower classes living in Paris during the French Wars of Religion. Before evaluating the importance of the political motivations on the violence of the massacre, the existing historiography will be examined to investigate the different lenses that are used to approach the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre. The different historians and their works whose viewpoints will be studied and compared in this paper include; Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth Century France*, Stuart Carroll's *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France*, Arlette Jouanna's *The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre: The Mysteries of a Crime of State*, Allan A. Tulchin's *Massacres During the French Wars of Religion*, Janine Estebe's short article *The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France A Comment* and Mack P. Holt's findings in *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629*. In addition to looking at the viewpoints of other historians, it is important to look to the primary sources in order to interpret the thoughts and feelings of the people living through the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre. The historical documents that will be studied include views from both the Protestants and the Catholics in an effort to gain a better understanding of how the political conflicts of people in sixteenth-century Paris allowed for the violence of the Massacre to reach the levels it did.

Violence during the French Wars of Religion, primarily the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre cannot be examined without referencing Natalie Davis' work *The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth Century France*. Natalie Davis was the first historian to look at the cultural views of the popular masses and why they would have participated so thoroughly in the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Davis took a cultural viewpoint as she examined the past history of the French and the traditions of violence that the people living in the sixteenth century would have turned to as a basis of how to respond to the religious and political conflicts arising throughout the French Wars of Religion. Davis viewed the violence surrounding the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre as so intense because it connected with the people and their beliefs in how they see the world.³ To support her argument that it was the culture and traditions of the people that led to the violence, she examined examples of earlier riots, primarily grain riots, and what caused those events. By looking at riots prior to the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, Davis concluded that the tendency towards violence is best explained in the terms of the

roles and patterns of behavior allowed by their culture.⁴ Her conclusions were that the French people had a predisposition towards violent riots before the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Davis' article set a precedent for studying why the wars of religion got so violent through the cultural lens of looking at the people who participated in the massacre, as until then the culture of the French people had not been studied as a motivation for violence in the French Wars of Religion.

Stuart Carroll looked at the people involved in the massacre as well, though his view was more socio-cultural. Similar to Davis, he examined the people's traditions and how those led to the violence of the Massacre. However, he focused more on the nobility involved in the massacre and the past French traditions of dueling to settle feuds. In his book *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France*, Carroll dedicates the first section to the history and case study of dueling as a way of settling feuds and carrying out vengeance in France during the early modern period. He states that, "[for] the nobility sincere faith mingled freely with sentiments of revenge. Vengeance killing was based on reason, on rational calculation, and conspiracy."⁵ This means that the driving force behind the violence led by the nobles was vengeance and religious ideology. The popular masses, seemingly took permission from the nobility. However they did not carry out their violence in the same traditional way the nobles did. Using the example of the duc de Guise, Carroll explains noble violence during the massacre. The duc de Guise had wished to show that he had carried out his feud with Coligny in accordance to the King's wishes through dueling, before distancing himself from the "gruesome violence of the popular masses."⁶ This interpretation, by looking at the customs of the people, also touches on the social differences of the sixteenth century and how the nobles had carried out tradition and vengeance.

Another lens to look through when discussing why the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre became so violent is the political motivations behind the initial murders that sparked the widespread violence. In her book *The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre: The Mysteries of a Crime of State*, Arlette Jouanna argued that the massacre was a political attempt to solidify the King's power and that the massacre paved the way for the rise of absolutism. Jouanna focused mostly on the attempt on Admiral Coligny's life on August 22, 1572, two days before the assassination and beginning of the massacre. She saw the levels of violence as the political ramifications of the attempt on the Admirals life and the rumours it created. The Catholic nobility as well as the king became increasingly worried about Protestant revenge. The angry attitude of the Protestants following the attack was seen as an attack on royal sovereignty. This led to a council meeting on August 23 where the decision to assassinate several Protestant seditious leaders was made.⁷ In an address to Parlement on August 26, King Charles IX stated that he had to act using the 'sword that God had placed in his hands.'⁸ Jouanna clearly argues in this passage of her research that the massacre began with a planned attack on the Protestant leadership that stemmed from political motivations. From these initial murders, the massacre broke out and became an uncontrollable wave of violence against Protestants from all social classes. Though this is the case that Jouanna makes, Carroll argues against the idea that the premeditation of the murders of the Protestant leadership sparked the popular movement towards murder and violence.⁹ Carroll sees the murder of Coligny as an event separate from the massacre.

Another view of the massacre is through the political lens. Allan A. Tulchin argues that politics had an important role in the violence of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre. However unlike Jouanna, he examined several examples of massacres and how they were political calculations by military or political leaders. Tulchin's argument was that the instigation of the massacres came from the political leaders who planned them. He also made the claim that the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, as well as the subsequent massacres in the provinces was carried out by civilian militia, which contradicts Da-

vis' claim that it was the popular masses that orchestrated the violence of the massacre.¹⁰ Throughout his article, he made connections between the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre and more modern massacres. His purpose was to examine what massacres consisted of and who was behind them.

Janine Estebe directly argued against Natalie Davis in her short article *The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France A Comment*. Estebe took the stance that the social make up of those involved in the massacre was the most important factor in looking at the violence of the event. She particularly examined the socio-economic role that the circumstances of the time played in the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, such as the food shortages of the early 1570s. Estebe did admit that economic factors were not the immediate cause of popular disturbance, but they did create unstable conditions that set the stage for the violence.¹¹ She then continued on to examine the role that the social tensions played in the outbreak of violence during the massacre. In one of the sources Estebe examined, Jean Crespin used the term artisan in his Martyrology, which was a survey of those who were killed in the massacre. Estebe stated that this term could refer to a number of different level jobs, however the Protestant religion in France was a wealthy one, indicating that those artisans who were killed were likely well paid. This brings up her main point that social factors in the violence of the massacre were important, and cannot be ignored.

Without the disagreement of religious doctrine to begin the conflict, the French Wars of Religion would not have happened. This is the view Mack P. Holt takes when examining violence during the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre in his book *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629*. He argued that it was religious tensions rather than political decisions from the nobility that were the root of the violence.¹² He looked at the types of victims targeted by the Parisian Catholics in order to support his point that it was not a politically motivated event. The targets of the violence were non-noble Huguenots, who would not have had political ramifications for their murder.¹³ Holt studied the different factors in the French Wars of Religion, including some that were political or social. In the chapter about the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre Holt addressed the other factors, such as politics and socio-economics. He said that though they did play a role in the massacre, they were not the most important factor by which to study the violence of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Instead, he looked at it as a fundamental difference in doctrine between the Catholics and Protestants that could not be ignored and instead escalated into a massacre.¹⁴ As Holt argues, one cannot look at the Wars of Religion without understanding the underlying importance of religion.

Now that the historiography of the Massacre has been examined, the main factor of the violence can be discussed. There are many factors that are used to explain why the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre became so violent. Though there is evidence of cultural, social and religious factors, political factors and motivations are ultimately what led to the excessive violence. At the very heart of the conflict is the religious divide between the Protestants and the Catholics. This then raises the issue of international politics and France being a one-religion nation. However, religion cannot be the most important factor because religious divide was present at all other points of conflict between the Protestants and the Catholics, yet there had not been a massacre to the extent of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Likewise, there were some social and cultural factors as well, however they too did not cause the extreme violence that occurred. The event that set off the massacre was the elimination of the Huguenot leadership, which is a politically motivated act. As the documents surrounding the massacre reveal, there was political motivations in the killing.

The events of the massacre were sparked by the attempted assassination of Admiral Coligny.

Many Protestants believed that the attempt was made by the duc de Guise as an act of vengeance. Both François Hotman in *A True and Plain Report of the Furious Outrages of France* and Giovanni Michiel in his *Report to the Venetian Senate on the Wounding of the Admiral* discuss this idea. Although Michiel also makes the case that the order for assassination came from the Queen Mother, Catherine de Medici as a way to exert her control over King Charles IX.¹⁵ Michiel also recounts that the Queen Mother had also heard of a Huguenot plot to attack Paris and the King, which lead to the King taking charge and meeting with the Merchant's Provost. This is recorded in the government document *Report by the Merchants' Provost* the night before the Saint Bartholomew's Massacre was to take place. The document states that the merchants' provost was called before the King and his council where he was informed that a Huguenot plot was to occur and he was to mobilize the city and lock the gates.¹⁶ This action by the King would later wind up trapping people fleeing the city from the persecution.

Though the political reasons behind the murder of the Admiral were related more to national politics surrounding the elites of society, the popular masses joined in as well. Political motivations for the people were more related to personal vendettas against their neighbours. Michiel continues to look at the events of the massacre and comes to the conclusion that politics played a role as the motivation for violence. He writes; "[they] had no feeling, no mercy on anyone, even those who kneeled before them and humbly begged for their lives. If one man hated another because of some argument or lawsuit all he had to say was 'this man is a Huguenot' and he was immediately killed."¹⁷ This shows that people were killing others for personal and political reasons under the guise that they were carrying out their role of ridding Paris of Protestants. In looking at some of the victims of the massacre it can be seen that the victims targeted were not always random Protestants, but rather those that had a relationship with some of the murderers, such as the magistrate Pierre de la Place.¹⁸ These reasons led to the widespread violence of the massacre.

It was not just the political reasoning behind the motivations to murder; the people were also under the belief that they were fulfilling orders from their King in murdering the Protestants. In the document *Memoirs of the State of France under Charles IX* by Simon Goulart, the dukes of Aumale, Guise, and Nevers went through the streets calling out "kill, kill them all; the King commands it."¹⁹ In the examples of the murders he provides, Goulart writes that the Catholics demanded entry into Protestant homes in order to kill them by saying they must open the door in the name of the King.²⁰ Goulart is a Protestant minister writing six years later, if his word can be taken as truth, then the massacre was orchestrated by the King and his council in a calculated move against the Protestant population. In another Protestant source, the mention of the members of the King's council calling for the killing is mentioned as well, giving more credit to Goulart's claim.²¹ This begins to raise the question of the role the King played in the massacre. Through the documents, it has already been seen that political reasons instigated much of the violence by not only the elites but also the popular masses.

Historians have questioned the role of King Charles IX since the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre took place. Many have viewed Catherine de Medici as well as the duc de Guise and other councilors as having a hand in orchestrating the massacre. However, the role that Charles IX had has remained contradictory. It was not until after the massacre that Charles IX took credit for orchestrating the event. He dismisses the idea that it was religiously fuelled and states that the massacre happened due to the Huguenot plot.²² However, the purpose that Charles IX may have had in claiming the responsibility is mixed. Due to the popular support of the massacre by the Catholics, claiming responsibility would place him in their favour, thereby strengthening his position of authority. The wording of his announcement though shows that he is also trying to prevent another massacre in Paris. By denying that it is a

massacre with religious intent, he attempts to maintain the Peace of Saint-Germain and prevent further outbreaks of crime.²³ The councilors and the people used the King's permission as reason to attack the Protestants despite the fact that the King did not issue a statement about the massacre until several days later.

The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre remains one of the most violent events of the French Wars of Religion. Many historians have tried to determine why the massacre became so violent when earlier massacres had not reached this size. There is still debate among historians about which factor they think is the most important as their research proves through the different lenses of political, religious, cultural, and social. Each of these different perspectives plays a role in the violence of the massacre, with religious differences as the underlying conflict. The most important factor is the political motivations that led to the wave of violence in France. The city of Paris at the onset of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre was tense with religious hatred, just waiting for the tipping point, which was the murder of the Huguenot leadership, and led to the participation by the popular masses. When the King seemingly endorses violence people participate as a way to not only wipe out what they see as religiously wrong, but also to fulfill their own political vendettas. The St. Bartholomew Day Massacre was an event in history that changed the relationships between the Catholics and the Protestants. After the Massacre, the hope that the nation could move past the religious differences was eradicated.

Notes

- 1 Mack P. Holt, "Popular Disorder and Religious Tensions: The Making of a Massacre, 1570-1574," in *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 76.
- 2 Holt, "The Making of a Massacre," 82.
- 3 Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Rites Of Violence: Religious Riot In Sixteenth-Century France," *Past and Present* 59 (May 1973): 90.
- 4 Davis, "The Rites of Violence," 90.
- 5 Stuart Carroll, *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 281.
- 6 Carroll, *Blood and Violence*, 281.
- 7 Arlette Jouanna, *The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre: The Mysteries of a Crime of State* (24 August 1572), trans. Joseph Bergin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 104.
- 8 Jouanna, *Mysteries of a Crime of State*, 105.
- 9 Carroll, *Blood and Violence*, 277.
- 10 Allan A. Tulchin, "Massacres during the French Wars of Religion*," *Past & Present* 214 (2012): 110.
- 11 Janine Estebe, "The Rites Of Violence: Religious Riot In Sixteenth-Century France A Comment," *Past and Present* 67 (1975): 128.
- 12 Holt, "The Making of a Massacre," 86.
- 13 Holt, "The Making of a Massacre," 86.
- 14 Holt, "The Making of a Massacre," 87.
- 15 Giovanni Michiel, "Report to the Venetian Senate on the Wounding of the Admiral" (1572), in *The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Barbara B. Diefendorf (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009), 93.
- 16 "Report by the Merchants' Provost" (1572), in *The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Barbara B. Diefendorf (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009), 98-99.
- 17 Michiel, "Report to the Venetian Senate", 90.
- 18 Simon Goulart, "Memoirs of the State of France under Charles IX" (1578), in *The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Barbara B. Diefendorf (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009), 102.
- 19 Goulart, "Memoirs of the State of France," 102.
- 20 Goulart, "Memoirs of the State of France," 107.

21 “The Wake-Up Call for the French and Their Neighbors” (1574), in *The Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Barbara B. Diefendorf (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2009), 113.

22 Charles IX, “Declaration on the Reasons for the Admiral’s Death” (1572), in *The Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Barbara B. Diefendorf (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2009), 115.

23 Charles IX, “Reasons for the Admiral’s Death,” 115.