

A micro-history of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre

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Jérémie Foa has written a history of the “other side” of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Nameless people, thrown into the Seine or buried in mass graves, succumbed to the blows of killers as well as to collective forgetting, which the historian seeks to remedy. This is an important book on mass violence.

Reviewed: Jérémie Foa, *Tous ceux qui tombent. Visages de la Saint-Barthélemy* (All Who Fall: Faces of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre), Paris, La Découverte, 2021, 347 p., 19 €.

This book is not--in contrast to a literature that has already spilled much ink--a new study examining the political responsibilities and apparently premeditated actions of Catherine de' Medici, King Charles IX, and the Guise family during the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre.¹ To the contrary, it is a study that sheds light, from below, on the least known murderers and victims--the "minority voices" (p. 153) of a tragedy that has inspired many writers and film directors.

Jérémie Foa has written a "history of other people" that, he explains, turns its back on the Louvre. For it was not only the defenestrated body of Admiral de Coligny that "fell" onto Paris' cobblestones on the night of August 24, 1572. Many other bodies

¹ Voir Marc Venard, « Arrêtez le massacre ! », *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, n° 39, 1992, p. 645-661 et surtout Arlette Jouanna, *La Saint-Barthélemy. Les mystères d'un crime d'État*, Paris, Gallimard, 2007.

were also cut down before being tossed into the Seine or packed into mass graves. Yet they have been forgotten, despite subsequent commemorative on the part of Protestants, notably the writings of pastor Simon Goulart.

The Saint Bartholomew "season"

Foa's book is the result of patient detective work. His attempts to identify individuals and explain their social trajectories leads the reader through archival arcana, particularly the records of notaries and judicial sources, such as the Conciergerie's prison records, whose material characteristics he describes. By reconstructing the crime scenes, Foa calls attention to the distinctive traits of a group of Parisian murderers, who seem to have played a decisive role. Persuaded that this group is the "key to the massacre" (p. 59), he explains how they operated, their motives, and their proximity to their victims.

Foa's method is that of microhistory, as defined by the historian Carlo Ginzburg. It is only by considering individuals, their professional activities, physical environments, and places of residence that the fabric of their social relations becomes clear. It is not the least merit of the book to show the degree to which murderers and victims knew one another and even engaged in daily interactions. Nor was the location of the most fearsome killers' homes incidental to the massacre's effectiveness.

One of the worst killers, Thomas Croizier, lived in the Valley of Misery (Vallée de Misère), a street with a gloomy, evocative name located along the Seine, near the Pont aux Meuniers. Though there certainly existed a homicidal anti-Protestant imagination, emphasizing the need to purge the cities of "pollution" and seeing the Seine as a sewer, Foa shows how the killers' residences were "economic rents" that allowed them to dispose easily of their victims' bodies (p. 51). To use a catch phrase, the "Saint Bartholomew" was also a "season," spreading its violence to some fifteen of the kingdom's cities in the weeks and months following the Parisian tragedy.

The narrative thread

The book's craftsmanship is unusual for a work of such erudition. In his effort to recover "tiny lives," Foa regularly draws on extensive extracts from documents: post-mortem inventories, depositions made by witnesses to notaries, interrogations, timetables, and correspondence. These sources have a "reality effect" on the book's twenty-six short chapters. The chapters are like projector beams aimed at a series of case studies, from the story of Marie Robert, whose husband, the Châtelet's commissioner, appears astonishingly to thank his wife's killers, to that of the three Sevyn brothers who appeared before the Bordeaux Parlement. A final chapter, in the form of an epilogue, considers the killers' fates after 1572.

Foa's critical approach to sources, his doubts, and his enthusiasm for certain "finds" are not relegated to footnotes but fill the text itself. Readers will feel like they, too, are opening archive boxes. Rummaging through sources, their interconnections--the whole scaffolding of historical inquiry is made transparent, in what becomes a lesson in historical method. At times, the goal is to solve paleographic mysteries that will reveal the identity of a victim or killer (p. 93, p. 130-131); at others, to critique the value of eye-witness accounts that deliberately anonymized the murderers to ensure that "good bourgeois and the militia" were not saddled with undue responsibility (p. 229).

The book's narrative thread, which at times resembles a *feuilleton*, is woven by an historian writing in the first-person singular. Readers follow his inquiry's progress and his frequently melancholy reflections on places that have yet to become sites of memory (such as the pages devoted to the possible location of mass graves on Maquerelle Island, where the Eiffel Tower now stands, p. 101-111). This captivating narrative recalls the literary style of Jean-Paul Kauffmann, guiding its readers through a sequence of clues as it pursues the mysterious trail of an historical event.²

We will ignore a few "ego-historical" comments that, due to their reassuring self-evidence, seem to clash with the rest of the book. More troubling is the game of mirrors that Foa plays with the Saint-Bartholemew's Day Massacre and France's dark years during the Second World War. The titles of several chapters ("Goodbye, Children" and "Without Sorrow or Pity") are far from innocent. The semantics of such terms as "round-up," "*milicien*," and "pillage" (in reference to Protestant goods) implies

² Jean-Paul Kauffmann, *La lutte avec l'ange*, Paris, La Table Ronde, 2001.

similarities that can be deceptive. For Foa is quite literally haunted by his topic and history's ghosts. Metaphors relating to ghosts and gravesites abound. The author, quoting Michel de Certeau, reminds us that Clio's disciples, too, seek to "calm the dead who continue to haunt the present" (p. 607).

Like historians working on mass murders and contemporary genocides, Foa has not consulted his archives with immunity. He admits that "archives are performative. They can be a dagger blow, a way of being put to death a second time" (p. 69).

A killer's *habitus*

Foa readily admits his debts to his predecessors, particularly Barbara Diefendorf and Robert Descimon.³ Even so, his book provides an original and persuasive account of how the massacre resulted from the knowledge of policing and military functions acquired by a group of killers over more than a decade.

Since at least the third War of Religion (1568-1570), members of the Parisian bourgeoisie acquired the habit of questioning, arresting, interrogating, and harassing Protestants. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that the massacre consisted of blind killing protected and encouraged by the perpetrators' anonymity, Foa shows that the killers consisted of individuals who, exasperated by the monarchy's decision to decriminalize heresy, apply the religious peace, and release recently imprisoned heretics, saw the Saint-Bartholemew's Day Massacre as a golden opportunity to be rid of them once and for all: "For a massacre like Saint-Bartholemew's to be possible, a degree of closeness between killers and killed was necessary" (p. 39).

Who then were these murderous bourgeois? They consisted of artisans, merchants, men of law, and officers--in other words, prominent citizens who were firmly integrated into their parishes and neighborhoods. Thomas Crozier, for example, was a *tireur d'or*--an artisan specialized in goldwork--and a bearer of Saint Genevieve's shrine. He also belonged to the urban militia, an institution that embodied the Parisian bourgeoisie's right to defend itself by organizing the guard at the city's gates and ramparts and patrolling the capital's sixteen districts. At his side were two other

³ Barbara Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross. Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris*, New York-Oxford, 1991; Robert Descimon, "Solidarité Communautaire et sociabilité armée: les compagnies de la milice bourgeoise à Paris (XVIe-XVIIe siècles)," Françoise Thélamon ed., *Sociabilité, pouvoirs et société*, Rouen, 1987, p. 599-610.

members of the militia, Claude Chenet and the merchant Nicolas Pezou. The three of them alone were responsible for half the 504 Protestant arrests that occurred between 1567-1570 (p. 34).

These men were well armed: post-mortem inventories show that they owned veritable arsenals. They were also representative of zealous Catholic milieus. This was the case of Captain Pigneron, a draper on Place Maubert, a militia officer and a member of the Saint-Charlemagne confraternity at the Mathurins' church. He would later join the Catholic League. The arrests and murders of 1572 were perpetrated by men who, benefiting from the experience that came with their positions, were well acquainted with their neighborhoods and Huguenot "suspects." When the tocsin of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois sounded, they massacred entire households. Then, throughout the night, they organized the pillage and distribution of booty among the greedy mob and neighbors.

Killers rewarded and enriched

Foa does not reject interpretations that claim the murderous violence of the Saint Bartholemew's Day Massacre participated in the imaginary of holy wars and undertook to eradicate a heresy by killing Protestants in God's name. But his analysis focuses on what can be found in notarial and municipal sources: the panorama of a vast scheme of pillage and despoilation, in Toulouse as well as Paris. This scheme benefited first and foremost the killers themselves. Crozier, for instance, chose to live in the home of a murdered Protestant goldsmith (p. 277).

Pillage--because the homes of Protestants were literally emptied of their property--occurred with the approval of authorities. In Paris, since the beginning of the Wars of Religion, the Parlement authorized Tanchou to "compensate" himself by selling off the property of Huguenot printers (p. 198). Should this be seen as evidence of weak monarchical institutions or, to the contrary, as proof that that the killers were the regime's henchmen? The benefits bestowed on some of the massacre's murderers gives one pause. Claude Chenet was tied to the Guise family, but, like his partner Nicolas Pezou, he appears to have been well seen by Catherine de' Medici. At minimum, Pezou enjoyed the recognition of King Charles IX, who made him the treasurer of the French guard in 1573, before naming him provost general of

Languedoc, despite the recriminations of Protestants appalled by his record (p. 269-271).

In this way, the question of the king's involvement, even in a premeditated way--which is not the book's point--arises indirectly. Perhaps the authorities' tacit approval can be explained by the trust bestowed upon prominent subjects, who were respected in their neighborhoods and charged with maintaining public order--and who, most importantly, were aligned with zealous Catholic opinion in the capital.

Moreover, the confusion resulting from the massacre also provided an occasion for activating aristocratic clientele eager to settle old scores. Foa shows that the clients of the Duke of Alençon, the king's youngest brother, took advantage of the situation to eliminate the old lieutenant of the bailiwick of Perche, who was visiting Paris. The latter--a Protestant by the name of François de la Martellière, had exercised his office under the Duke's auspices, before being replaced by a Catholic (p. 230-235).

Interpreting violence

The first lesson of this essay concerns the role of urban militias during the Wars of Religion. Clearly, these policing and defensive structures depended on a detailed knowledge of their environments. They drew on an ability to identify individuals that relied on neighborhood connections, but also on the development of police activities in municipal administration.

Can the case of Paris, which is studied in detail, not be situated within a more general trajectory that also concerns other French towns? In Abbeville in 1570, the *échevinage* (or municipal government) decided, at the request of the royal government, to draw up a list of Protestants and the value of their property.⁴ These identification procedures and filing systems are found elsewhere, particularly in Lyon. A recent dissertation shows how the municipality's heightened regulatory activity was a response to the multiple crises (including epidemics and military insecurity) of the late sixteenth century.⁵

⁴ Marcel Godet, *Les Protestants à Abbeville au début des guerres de Religion (1560-1572)*, Paris, Fischbacher, 1919, p. 42-46.

⁵ Aurélien Roulet, "*Au nom du bien public.*" *Exercer le pouvoir réglementaire dans une société en guerre. Lyon, vers 1561-vers 1594*, History dissertation, Sorbonne Paris Nord, December 2021.

When considering the motives of the militiamen-killers, one must not overlook the fear of internal enemies and a Protestant coup--a fear that was particularly pronounced in cities that, in 1562, had experienced iconoclasm, occupation by Protestant forces, or the threat of a Protestant siege. Foa might have put greater emphasis on these factors, which undoubtedly contributed to the ripple effect unleashed by the militiamen's murders. By 1567, when the Prince de Condé had just occupied Saint Denis, the fear of a Huguenot plot compelled the Parisian militia to search Protestant households.⁶ 1572 is connected to the traumatic memories of 1562.

Consequently, an explanatory link is missing: the role played by the fear of Huguenots in anti-Protestantism, which was intensified by traumatic memories from the early stages of the Wars of Religion (particularly iconoclasm). This could lead a hurried reader to conclude that the book simply presents violence as the resolution of interpersonal conflicts between neighbors, motivated by greed and envy.

The book's epilogue examines, in turn, the fate of around ten killers following the massacre. What unites them is a recurring phrase: "died in his bed." Ten times, the author uses quasi cinematographic prose to paint the portrait of these men as they grew old, offering a verdict with moral consequences. All of them, Foa observes, died rich, pampered, and protected. They were never judged or even bothered for their crimes.

Yet it is unclear by whom and how they could have been tried. The religious peace and the Edict of Nantes decreed an amnesty and favored forgetting as a means for reconciling Catholics and Protestants. Moreover, many killers later prospered through their involvement in the Leagues. This was no coincidence. Dreams of unity and a purified utopia were the political and religious project of what became known as the Holy Union of Catholics. King Henry IV ensured the defeat of this project. The erstwhile murders belonged to the vanquished Leagues.

When the reader closes this book, after listening to witnesses to this ordeal and considering the reconstruction of its crimes, they are likely to feel that they have seen another side of the Saint Bartholemew's Day Massacre. The religious fanaticism it portrays is tied to material concerns and sordidly trivial and all-too-human feelings. Though the killings' motives are far from being definitively established, the archival

⁶ Jouanna, p. 163

materials cleverly presented in this narrative will unnerve readers due to their contemporary resonance. In this respect, the book's wager is successful.

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