

Lesson 2: Student Handout 2.3A—France's Religious Wars

The Wars of Religion

The latter half of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century brought about one of the most passionate and calamitous series of wars that Europe had ever experienced. The early Reformation had been, in hindsight, remarkably free from bloodshed; the honeymoon, however, lasted only a short while. It was inevitable that the growing division between Christian churches in Europe would lead to a series of armed conflicts for over a century. Protestants and Catholics would shed each other's blood in prodigious amounts in national wars and in civil wars. These struggles would eventually shatter the European monarchical traditions themselves. The monarchy, which had always seemed an impregnable political institution, was challenged by Protestants unhappy with the rule of Catholic kings. The final result of these struggles would be the overthrow and execution of Charles I in England in the middle of the seventeenth century, a historical earthquake that permanently changed the face of Europe.

The French Wars of Religion: 1562-1598

The first major set of wars fought over the new churches was a series of civil wars fought in France. In 1559, Francis II became king of France at the ripe old age of fifteen. Understanding that the monarch was weak, three major noble families began to struggle for control of France: the Guises (pronounced, geez) in eastern France, the Bourbons in southern France, and the Montmorency-Chatillons in central France. Of the three, the Guises were both the most powerful and the most fanatical about Catholicism; they would eventually gain control of the young monarch and, for all practical purposes, rule the state of France. The Bourbons and the Montmorency-Chatillons were mostly Catholics who—for political reasons—supported the Protestant cause.

The French Protestants were called Huguenots (pronounced, hoo-guh-no), and members of both the Bourbon and Montmorency-Chatillon families were major leaders in the Huguenot movement. The Huguenots represented only a very small part of the French population; in 1560, only seven or eight percent of the French people were Huguenots. They were, however, concentrated in politically-important geographical regions; as a result, they were disproportionately powerful in the affairs of France. It is important to understand that the rivalry between the Guises and the other two families was primarily a political rivalry; this political rivalry, however, would be swept up in the spiritual conflict between the Catholic Church and the new reformed churches.

Francis II died in 1560 after only one year as king. At his death, his younger brother, Charles IX (ruled 1560-1574) assumed the throne. Because he was too young to serve as king, his mother, Catherine de Medici, became regent (a regent is the ruler of a kingdom when the king is incapable of exercising that rule). Catherine was a brilliant and powerful political thinker; she understood right off that the Guises were a threat to her and to her son. In order to tilt the political balance away from the powerful Guise family, she cultivated the Bourbons and the Montmorency-Chatillons. In the process, however, she also had to cultivate the support of the Huguenots who were closely allied to those two families. Until this time, it was illegal for Huguenots to worship publicly (although there were over 2000 Huguenot churches in 1561). In 1562, Catherine took a great leap forward in religious toleration by allowing Huguenots to hold public worship outside the boundaries of towns. They were also allowed to hold Church assemblies. Catherine was a Catholic and wanted France to remain Catholic; she did not, however, want the Guises to be calling all the shots. The only way to chip away at the political power of the Guises was to increase the political power of the other major families and their Protestant allies.

The Guises, for their part, understood what this religious tolerance was all about and quickly clamped down on it. In March 1562, an army led by the Duke of Guise attacked a Protestant church service at Vassy in the province of Champagne and slaughtered everybody they could get their hands on: men, women, and children—all of whom were unarmed. Thus began the

French wars of religion, which were to last for almost forty years and destroy thousands of innocent lives.

For all her brilliance, Catherine was placed in an impossible position. She did not want any noble family to exercise control over France; she simply wanted power to be more balanced. She also did not want a Protestant France. So the only strategy open to her was to play both sides, which she did with enormous shrewdness.

This balancing game came to an end, however, when Catherine helped the Guise family plot the assassination of Gaspard de Coligny, a Montmorency-Chatillon family member who was one of the major leaders of the French Huguenots. The assassination failed; Coligny was shot but not killed. The balancing game was over; the Huguenots and Coligny were furious at both Catherine and the Guises. Fearing a Huguenot uprising, Catherine convinced Charles IX that the Huguenots were plotting his overthrow under the leadership of Coligny. On August 24, 1572, the day before St. Bartholomew's Day, royal forces hunted down and executed over three thousand Huguenots, including Coligny, in Paris. Within three days, royal and Guise armies had hunted down and executed over twenty thousand Huguenots in the single most bloody and systematic extermination of non-combatants in European history until World War II.

The St. Bartholomew Massacre was a turning point in both French history and the history of the European Christian Church. Protestants no longer viewed Catholicism as a misguided Church, but as the force of the devil itself. No longer were Protestants fighting for a reformed Church, but they suddenly saw themselves fighting for survival against a Catholic Church whose cruelty and violence seemed to know no bounds. Throughout Europe, Protestant movements slowly transformed into militant movements.

In 1576, Henry III ascended to the throne; he was the youngest brother of Francis II and Charles IX. By this point, France had become a basket case. On the one hand, the Guises had formed a Catholic League, which was violent and fanatical. On the other hand, the Huguenots were filled with a passion for vengeance. Like his mother, Henry tried to stay in the middle of the conflict. Unlike his mother, he had immense popular

support for this middle course; the St. Bartholomew Massacre had deeply troubled moderate Catholics and the growing conflict upset moderate Huguenots. These moderates were called *politiques* ("politicians"), since their central interest was the political and social stability of France rather than their religious beliefs.

The Catholic League was aided by Philip II of Spain who dedicated his monarchy to overthrowing the Protestant churches of other countries. By the mid-1580s, the Catholic League was in control of France and, after Henry III attempted to attack the League in 1588, the League drove him from Paris and embarked on a systematic massacre of non-combatants that rivaled the earlier St. Bartholomew's Massacre.

In exile, Henry III struck up an alliance with his Huguenot cousin, Henry of Navarre. Henry of Navarre was a *politique*; he believed that the peace and security of France were far more important than imposing his religious views. Before the two Henrys could attack Paris, however, Henry III was stabbed to death by a fanatical, fury-driven Dominican friar in 1589. Since Henry III had no children, Henry of Navarre, as next in line to the throne, became King of France as Henry IV (ruled 1589-1610).

Henry understood that the only way that France would find peace was if it were ruled by a tolerant Catholic king, so on July 25, 1593, he rejected his Protestant faith and officially became Catholic. On April 13, 1598, Henry IV ended the long and tiring religious wars in France by proclaiming the Edict of Nantes. This Edict granted to Huguenots the right to worship publicly, to occupy public office, to assemble, to gain admission to schools and universities, and to administer their own towns.

Lesson 2: Student Handout 2.3B—Religious Wars in Spain

The year 1556 saw the accession of perhaps the most important monarch of the sixteenth century: Philip II of Spain (ruled 1556-1598). Of all the monarchs of Europe, Philip was the most zealous defender of his religious faith, and his energies in pursuit of this defense greatly changed the face of Europe.

In the first half of his reign, he was instrumental in stopping the Turkish incursions into Europe. Philip's military power lay in his navy, which was the most powerful and imposing navy of the sixteenth century. Allied with Venice, his navy defeated the Turkish navy in the Gulf of Corinth near Greece and effectively halted the Turkish invasions of Europe. After this spectacular triumph, Philip then turned his efforts from routing the Muslims to routing the Protestants in Europe.

He first turned his sights to the Netherlands, a rich and prosperous merchant country that was ruled over by Spain. The Netherlands, however, had strong pockets of Calvinist resistance and the country slowly turned on its Spanish rulers. Philip responded by sending the Duke of Alba with an army to quell the revolt in 1567. Alba imposed a tribunal, the Council of Troubles, to question and sentence heretics (Protestants). The Dutch called this council the "Council of Blood," for it managed publicly to execute thousands of people before Alba was forced from the Netherlands.

Alba and his reign of terror did not quell the Protestant revolt in the Netherlands, but rather strengthened it. The central oppositional leader, William, the Prince of Orange (ruled 1533-1584), became a hero for the whole of the Netherlands, and in 1576 the Catholic provinces in the south allied themselves with the Protestant provinces in the north to revolt against Spain. The purpose of this alliance, called the Pacification of Ghent, was to enforce Netherlandish autonomy. The southern provinces, however, did not remain long in this alliance. In 1579, they made a separate peace with Spain (these southern provinces eventually became the country of Belgium) and the northern provinces formed a new alliance, the Union of Utrecht. Because Spain was overextended all over Europe, the northern provinces gradually drove the Spanish out until 1593, when the last Spanish soldier left Dutch soil. Still, the northern provinces were not recognized by Spain as an autonomous country until 1648 in the articles of the Peace of Westphalia.

Philip did not, however, want to interfere with the English, for England always seemed poised for a return to Catholicism. Elizabeth I of England also wanted to avoid any confrontation with Spain, so the war between the Spanish and the English was one of those unfortunate accidents of history—unfortunate, that is, for Spain.

In spite of Philip's reluctance to engage militarily with England, Elizabeth slowly ate

away at Philip's patience. She had signed a mutual defense treaty with France after Spain had defeated the Turks. Fearful of the Spanish navy, she recognized that only an alliance with another country could protect England from Spain's powerful navy. In the late 1570s, Elizabeth allowed English ships to pirate and ransack Spanish ships sailing to and from the New World. In 1585, just as the Protestant provinces of the Netherlands were beginning to drive the Spanish from their country, Elizabeth sent English soldiers to the Netherlands to aid in the revolt.

Philip finally decided to invade England after the execution of the Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots. He was in part encouraged in this move by the Pope's excommunication of Elizabeth several years earlier; the excommunication of a monarch made it incumbent on all practicing Catholics to use any opportunity they could to assassinate or overthrow the monarch. Philip gathered his navy and on May 30, 1588, he sent a mighty armada of over 130 ships to invade England. The Armada contained over 25,000 soldiers and the ships gathered for the invasion in the English Channel south of England. The English, however, were ready. Because of their treaty with the French, the invasion barges, which were meant to transport soldiers from the Spanish galleons to the English coastline, were not allowed to leave the coast of France. When fierce channel winds scattered the Spanish fleet to the east, English and Dutch warships were able to destroy the fleet ship by ship. What few ships remained struggled around the north

of England and down along the western coast, where several ships foundered.

In practical terms, the defeat of the Armada was a temporary setback for Spain. The 1590s saw impressive military victories for the Spanish. However, the defeat of the Armada was a tremendous psychological victory for European Protestants. Spain represented the only powerful military force that threatened the spread of Protestantism; when even the mighty Spanish navy could be defeated by an outnumbered English and Dutch fleet, Protestants everywhere were reinvigorated in their struggles against Spain and the Roman Catholic Church. By the end of the seventeenth century, Spain was no longer a major player in the power politics of Europe.

Lesson 2: Student Handout 2.3C — Major Results of the Thirty Years' War, 1618-1648

One major legacy of the Protestant Reformation was a violent period with seemingly-constant warfare based, in part, on the division of Europe into Catholic and Protestant enclaves. The conflicts began with the Peasants' War in Germany in the early sixteenth century, followed in the seventeenth century with religious wars involving many of the emerging European nation-states. In England, the Puritan Revolution sought to make England into a Protestant state. The Dutch also experienced a revolt of Protestants against Spanish Catholic rule. In France, the Protestant Huguenots fought the Catholic League and Protestant England battled Catholic Spain on land and sea.

The rise of national states such as England, France, Sweden, Denmark, and Spain, together with the rise of the Habsburg Empire centered in Germany, culminated in thirty years of bloody religious conflict. The battles occurred

mostly in German states, where Luther's new Protestant religion attracted a number of small states and principalities, while other areas remained loyal to the Catholic Church.

The battles of the Thirty Years' War were particularly brutal. Protestants looted Catholic cathedrals. The Catholic Inquisition burned many at the stake. Assassinations, atrocities, and mob violence were common on both sides. After fierce fighting and five years of negotiations, the Thirty Years' War ended in compromise with the Peace of Westphalia of 1648. This important set of treaties established the broad outlines of modern Europe and set the precedent for states to have either a Catholic or a Protestant majority. Germany, however, remained divided between the two faiths, a fact that contributed to postponing the unification of that country into a single nation-state for more than two centuries.

The following European states were involved in the religious wars:

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| Ireland | Roman Catholic |
| Scotland | Calvinist |
| England | Protestant (Church of England), strong Calvinist minority (Puritans) |
| France | Roman Catholic with a Huguenot, or Calvinist, minority |
| Spain, Portugal, Italy, Poland, Belgium, and Austria | Roman Catholic |
| The Netherlands | Calvinist |
| Switzerland | Catholic with strong Calvinist minority |
| Germany | Lutheran in northern sections, mostly Catholic in south |
| Bohemia (Czech Republic area today) | Catholics and Protestants |
| Balkan states | Catholic, Eastern Orthodox Christian, or Muslim |
| Russia | Eastern Orthodox Christian |
| Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark | Lutheran |

By the terms of the Treaty of Westphalia, the Habsburgs accepted the independence of Switzerland, and the separation of the United Provinces from the Spanish Netherlands. The sovereignty of the German states was also recognized, marking the failure of the Holy Roman Emperor to turn Germany into a centralized Catholic monarchy. France clearly came out of the war as a major power in Europe. The Netherlands was now independent of Spanish rule, and Sweden emerged as a rising power. The treaty also recognized Calvinism as a legitimate religion in Europe.

Like most major wars, the Thirty Years' War left significant legacies in its wake. The Catholic Church's long-standing dream of one universal Church was shattered, and the goal of an all-encompassing Holy Roman Empire under

Church control, long more symbol than political reality, also ended. Instead of European unity, the religious wars ushered in an age of small nation-states, most of which embraced either Catholicism or some branch of Protestantism. The Treaty of Westphalia also introduced the beginnings of the idea of religious toleration.

The war was especially costly for Germans. The various German states lost seven million people out of a population of 21 million, a higher percentage of its population than they lost in World War II. The war, fought mostly in territories of the German states, visited pillage, famine, disease, and chaos upon an entire generation. After the war, Germany returned to a feudal system. The German people's enormous sufferings remained in the German consciousness for many generations.

Lesson 2: Student Handout Lesson 2.4

Christian Religions in Europe in 1648, Following the Religions Wars

