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Review Article

The Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre up close

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Jérémie Foa, *Tous ceux qui tombent: visages du massacre de la Saint-Barthélemy* (Paris: La Découverte, 2021).

ABSTRACT

This review article discusses how Jérémie Foa's prize-winning book *Tous ceux qui tombent: visages de la Saint-Barthélemy* (2021) gives a history of the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre up close. It examines how Foa takes a fresh approach to the Massacre, one that 'turns its back on the Louvre, sets aside the monarch as well as the Guise and their intrigues, and ignores Coligny and the Queen Mother'. Instead, it evaluates Foa's powerful interpretation of Saint Bartholomew's Day as a neighbourhood massacre ('massacre de proximité'), an act of extreme violence committed by killers who often lived on the same road as their victims.

On 24 August 1572, Saint Bartholomew's Day, Charlotte d'Arces lay ill in her bed on the rue Saint-Antoine in Paris. Seigneur of several noble properties and a widow, she added a codicil to the will she first drafted two days earlier and made sure to leave her clients and employees due recompense for their services. The next day, Mathurine Rigoreux signed a marriage contract with the master paver Denis Goutte before the notary Philippe Lamiral on the rue Saint-Jacques, near the royal palace of the Louvre. On 28 August, the principal of the Collège d'Arras, Nicole Gaultier, signed a nine-year rental contract with the labourer Florent Bourbier. Marthe de Thirel, the widow of René Jamyn, settled her dower. Nothing seemed out of place in the final week of August 1572 according to the records of the notaries frequented by these Parisians, as they continued to mark stages of their life cycle and manage their affairs with attention to detail and the correct form required by these authorized documents (113–22).

All these Parisians carried on their daily lives despite the brutal violence taking place around them in the week that followed the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre, which began when the bells of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois rang out at daybreak on 24 August. That night Henri de

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Lorraine, duc de Guise, arrived at the rue de Béthisy with the king's Swiss Guards to kill the injured Protestant leader, the Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, who lay wounded after he was shot from a window two days earlier by Charles de Louviers, sieur de Maurevert. Targeted assassinations followed against leading Protestant noblemen who had gathered in Paris the previous week to celebrate the royal wedding between Henri de Navarre and Marguerite de Valois. These events have been closely examined by generations of historians, who have written extensively about the problems involved in determining who might have been responsible for the first assassination attempt on Coligny, and who was present at the meeting of the royal council that determined the fate of the Protestants. As the articles collected in this special issue show, at the time of the 450th anniversary of the massacre in 2022, historians continue to develop new perspectives on these climactic events which resulted in the killing of thousands of Protestants in Paris and throughout France, caused countless supporters of the Reform to convert to Catholicism, and undermined the Huguenot party as a force in the religious wars that continued to evolve for decades to come.

In *Tous ceux qui tombent: visages de la Saint-Barthélemy*, Jérémie Foa takes a fresh approach to the massacre, one that 'turns its back on the Louvre, sets aside the monarch as well as the Guise and their intrigues, and ignores Coligny and the Queen Mother' (9). Instead, Foa shows in vivid detail how Saint Bartholomew's Day was what he calls a neighbourhood massacre ('massacre de proximité'), an act of extreme violence committed by killers who often lived on the same road as their victims (8). Some of those neighbours—such as Charlotte d'Arcis, Florent Bourbier and Mathurine Rigoreux—apparently carried on their daily lives regardless. But others had their world turned upside down and their door forced open by a radical hard-core of the Paris civic militia, which Foa identifies as harbouring the principal men responsible for the killings. Thomas Croizier, Nicolas Pezou, Claude Chenet: these three alone arrested hundreds of Parisian Protestants in the years leading up to the massacre, and they are named (among a handful of others) by the principal narrative sources as the men responsible for the killings in August 1572. Using the registers of incarceration of the Conciergerie, the gaol nestled in the Palais de Justice at the heart of the city, Foa demonstrates that these men were responsible for the majority of the 504 arrests of Protestants carried out in the third civil war (1568–70) which resulted in an incarceration in the Conciergerie. This figure crystalizes the central thesis of Foa's book, which is that 'Saint Bartholomew's Day was prepared but not premeditated' (9). Time and again, those men who had raided Protestants' homes and placed them under arrest in the third civil war returned as executioners in the heady atmosphere of August 1572. The killers used their previous experience of tormenting the Protestants who lived alongside them to identify their victims during the massacre.

Foa's approach combines rigorous archival research with a lively style that addresses a non-specialist audience. It skilfully uses the stories of the killers, their victims and those who stood by as it evokes the panicked atmosphere of the massacre in Paris and, to a lesser extent, provincial cities such as Bordeaux, Lyon, Rouen and Toulouse. The book is published in the series 'À la source', edited by Clémentine Vidal-Naquet and published by La Découverte. This series encourages historians 'to approach their subject up close' and does an important service in making academic research accessible to readers at a modest price. Accordingly, fragments of sources appear throughout the book, confronting the reader with the disparate records that Foa so skilfully assembles into a coherent pattern. One chapter begins with a list of child victims of the massacre noted by the Calvinist pastor and historian Simon Goulart (161). Another reproduces the after-death inventory of the widow Gilette Charlier, followed by an account of her husband's murder during the massacre (205–12). The accompanying images show manuscript sources that evoke the dust of the reading room. These pictures display the scrawled cursive hand of a criminal interrogation, signatures on a notarial act, and the hulking leather-bound

volumes of the registers of incarceration. The approach might be disorienting for readers without a basic familiarity with the events of the massacre, yet it also makes available a striking range of manuscript evidence that allows the reader to follow the historian in search of the killers on Saint Bartholomew's Day up close, sometimes overcome by the emotional demands of this 'frightful way to pass a day in the archives' (117).

This approach also serves a clear rhetorical purpose, which is to let the sources speak for themselves as far as possible. In this sense, Foa cites Arlette Farge as 'a major source of inspiration for my work' (305 n.8), notably *Le Goût de l'archive* (1989) and perhaps also her recent book, *Vie oubliées: au cœur du XVIII^e siècle* (2019), published in the same series. Yet historical sources cannot speak for themselves in any straightforward sense, and the patterns that historians produce with them must always remain incomplete and contingent. Farge's work engages the reader in the layers of interpretation that accompany her arduous research in Parisian archives which survive from a later period in the city's history. Foa continues in this vein with compelling reflexive passages that set out his method. Red herrings also receive attention. In a passage analysing the codicil to Charlotte d'Arces' will, Foa confesses his initial desire to read this sole surviving Parisian notarial act signed on 24 August in relation to the massacre, and then goes on to explain the risks involved in diving into any such 'methodological void' (119). Another chapter highlights the difficulties inherent in identifying the killers when the organic orthography of the sixteenth century means that the man whom modern conventions might name Claude Chenet could also be recorded as 'Claude Chave', 'Chanet', 'Chane', 'Chamay' and so on (92–3), in a way that has allowed that militiaman to avoid the attention given to more notorious killers such as Croizier or Pezou. 'It is curious how a mangled name can distort history', Foa concludes (91).

The reflexive quality of Foa's writing permits him to explore a controversial subject on which historians' views will likely diverge, since the book raises major questions not only of source analysis and interpretation but also around the ethics of conducting research into an episode of extreme violence. The book turns on its head the enduring question of who was responsible for the massacre in Paris. It locates culpability for the killings not at the royal court, where the initial order was given to assassinate Coligny and other leading Protestants on Saint Bartholomew's eve, but instead among the most lethal members of the civic militia who took advantage of that order to instigate a general massacre. Included among 'all who fall' in the book's title (borrowed from Samuel Beckett's 1956 play of the same name, in one of several literary allusions throughout) are the killers and bystanders of the massacre, who occupy perhaps as much space in the book as the victims. But how far should historians apportion blame? This is a question that twentieth-century historians have reflected on extensively, particularly in their analysis of events such as the Holocaust and the Rwandan Genocide, which are comparisons Foa considers in the endnotes but understandably does not reflect on explicitly in the main text, given the constraints of the format.

Foa's position is that, by naming culprits, the historian can at least begin to do justice to victims of violence by ensuring that past crimes are not forgotten. Others might object that the historian's role is not to judge past events but to understand them in context. There are opportunities and risks in both approaches. By the standard of sixteenth-century law, those responsible for the massacre were granted amnesty by the edicts of pacification, despite the vigorous complaints of the Protestants throughout the 1570s.[1] The surviving evidence for the killings is fragmentary, partisan and often composed years later, and so it cannot provide the two valid eyewitnesses to each criminal act that magistrates required according to Roman law in order

1 On the edicts of pacification and the problems faced by the monarchy in applying them, see Foa's important first book, *Le Tombeau de la paix: une histoire des édits de pacification, 1560–1572* (Limoges, 2015). On the Protestants' demands that the killers on Saint Bartholomew's Day should be punished, see Mark Greengrass' article in this special issue.

to reach a guilty verdict in any case. Yet by broaching this significant question Foa's book also reaches beyond purely sixteenth-century concerns. A contextual approach does not always suffice when historical events leave a problematic legacy. Foa thereby contributes to a wider debate about historical responsibility for past violence that remains a live issue in France and throughout the world. His book takes the discussion further back still beyond the modern period, in a way that makes a more distant past feel strikingly present.

Foa's book has already succeeded in disseminating its findings beyond specialist audiences in France, where it has won the Prix de la contre-allée and the Prix lycéen du livre d'histoire de Blois. Although *Tous ceux qui tombent* is addressed to the general reader and *le grand public*, it takes care to draw attention to its scholarly sources in the endnotes and recognizes its influences in the acknowledgements, notably the pioneering works published on the massacre and the history of sixteenth-century Paris by Denis Crouzet, Robert Descimon and Barbara Diefendorf. These influences transpire through the atmosphere of panic evoked by Crouzet, the threads of social relations among Parisians traced by Descimon, and the agency of the Paris militia emphasized by Diefendorf. Social scientists and philosophers also appear prominently among the notes—Walter Benjamin, Pierre Bourdieu, Umberto Eco, Paul Ricœur, among others—although their influence is episodic and clarifies the interpretation of certain issues but does not overtly determine the approach of the whole, which is primarily driven by empirical findings in the archival sources.

Tous ceux qui tombent is a lively, engaged, and densely researched book; a landmark study that has justly received wide acclaim in France. It merits translation to reach the widest possible audience among anglophone readers interested not only in sixteenth-century history but in the history of violence more generally. A final sign of the importance of the book in this sense is that its findings open the way for future research. Notarial records survive in abundance for this period and Foa offers an excellent guide to retracing his steps through a comprehensive list of Parisian notaries active in August 1572, presented as a scholarly appendix. Further research into these records both in Parisian and departmental archives will surely reveal fresh traces of the impact of civil war in daily life for anyone willing to sift patiently through the voluminous holdings, which for the most part can only be consulted in reading rooms since they pose almost insurmountable problems for any project of mass digitalization. The 450th anniversary of the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre in 2022 marks a timely moment to pursue these leads, which will occupy historians of the French religious wars for years to come.