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Linden, David van der; Hamilton, Tom

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INTRODUCTION: REMEMBERING THE FRENCH WARS OF RELIGION

DAVID VAN DER LINDEN  AND TOM HAMILTON*

During the French presidential campaign of 2017, the Front National candidate Marine Le Pen caused outrage during a television interview when she identified Cardinal Richelieu as her political hero. She admired him, she said, because he had never allowed a minority religion to dominate France—a clear reference to the brutal military campaign against French Protestants during the last War of Religion (1621–29), culminating in the siege of La Rochelle that left at least 10,000 Protestants dead.¹ Le Pen's comments drew the ire of the Fédération protestante de France, which argued that the only reason she had 'maliciously and disrespectfully' evoked the past actions of French Protestants was to cast a shadow on France's Muslim population.² This was not the first clash between the Front National and French Protestants over historical analogies. In 2015 Le Pen's niece, the Vaucluse deputy Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, had praised the Provence region for its 'resistance against the Protestant Reformation, the German Occupation, and the disastrous project of the European Union'. In response, the pastor of the Protestant church of the Oratoire in Paris, James Woody, reminded her that such resistance had resulted in the 1545 state-sanctioned massacre of over 2,000 Protestants in the Lubéron.³ These ongoing memory wars demonstrate that, although the French Wars of Religion ended four centuries ago, competing narratives about the troubles still divide Catholics and Protestants in France today. Indeed, invoking the Wars of Religion to make contemporary political claims reveals something of the extent to which the Front National (now Rassemblement National) holds

* David van der Linden is Assistant Professor in Early Modern History at Radboud University Nijmegen and can be contacted at d.vanderlinden@let.ru.nl. Tom Hamilton is Assistant Professor in Early Modern Social and Cultural History at Durham University and can be contacted at tom.b.hamilton@durham.ac.uk. The authors would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Dutch Research Council (NWO) and the Institut Protestant de Théologie, Faculté de Montpellier for organizing the conference 'Remembering the French Wars of Religion' in September 2018, where the articles gathered in this special issue were presented.

¹ G. Poncet, 'Pourquoi Marine Le Pen voue un culte à Richelieu', *Le Point*, 19 April 2017.

² 'Richelieu et les huguenots: Le Pen s'attire les foudres de la Fédération protestante', *Le Point*, 19 April 2017.

³ E. Taraborrelli, 'Marion Maréchal-Le Pen suscite la colère des protestants', *Le Monde des religions*, 15 July 2015.

in tension a republican commitment to secularism (*laïcité*) with an established history of support among predominantly Catholic voters.⁴

It was precisely to put an end to such vindictive memory cultures that the 1598 Edict of Nantes ordered that ‘the memory of all things that have happened on either side ... shall remain extinguished and suppressed, as if they have never taken place’.⁵ After four decades of conflict, Henri IV reasoned that the only way to restore peace between Catholics and Protestants was to never again speak of the traumatic past. Remembering the wars, massacres and troubles, as well as the destruction of sacred relics and churches, would only perpetuate civil strife, whilst oblivion (*oubliance*) would allow French people on both sides of the religious divide ‘to live peacefully together as brothers, friends, and fellow citizens’. Yet despite this order to bury the past, men and women in early modern France continued to evoke memories of the religious wars, transmitting stories of what had happened to post-war generations that had no personal recollection of the conflict. Indeed, memories about the religious wars circulated widely in early modern France, since the wars had taken place not just on distant battlefields but also in people’s villages and towns, setting friends, neighbours and family members against each other, and tearing apart everything they had once held as known and immutable.

Building on recent work in the expanding field of memory studies, historians of early modern France have thus begun to ask how Catholics and Protestants looked back on the religious wars after 1598, how they recorded their memories, and what impact these memories had on post-war society. The work of Philip Benedict has been particularly influential. In a series of publications, Benedict has explored the construction of wartime memories by both Protestants and Catholics in the form of almanacs, commemorative processions, engravings and printed histories.⁶ It is noteworthy that scholars have largely focused on printed histories as the medium par excellence of recording and transmitting memories of the civil wars. There is abundant scholarship, for instance, on Jean Crespin’s famous Protestant martyrology, the *Livre des Martyrs*, and a growing interest in historians who narrated the wars from a less confessionally partisan perspective, such as Lancelot Voisin de la Popelinière, Jacques-Auguste de Thou and François Eudes de Mézeray.⁷ What unites these

⁴ D. Almeida, ‘Exclusionary secularism: the Front National and the reinvention of *laïcité*’, *Modern & Contemporary France*, 25 (2017), 249–63.

⁵ ‘Édit de Nantes’, articles 1 and 2, in B. Barbiche (ed.), ‘L’Édit de Nantes et ses antécédents’, http://elec.enc.sorbonne.fr/editsdepacification/edit_12.

⁶ P. Benedict, *Graphic History: The ‘Wars, Massacres and Troubles’ of Tortorel and Perrissin* (Geneva, 2007); P. Benedict, ‘Divided memories? Historical calendars, commemorative processions and the recollection of the wars of religion during the ancien régime’, *Fr Hist*, 22 (2008), 381–405; P. Benedict, ‘Shaping the memory of the French wars of religion: the first centuries’, in *Memory before Modernity: Practices of Memory in Early Modern Europe*, ed. E. Kuijpers, J. Pollmann, J. Müller and J. van der Steen (Leiden, 2013), 111–25.

⁷ J. Tucker, *The Construction of Reformed Identity in Jean Crespin’s ‘Livre des martyrs’* (London, 2017); I. De Smet, *Tbuanus: The Making of Jacques-Auguste de Thou (1553–1617)* (Geneva, 2006); G. Verron, *François Eudes de Mézeray: histoire et pouvoir en France au XVII^e siècle* (Milon-la-Chapelle, 2011); J. Berchtold and M.-M. Fragonard (eds.), *La Mémoire des*

studies is a willingness to consider early modern histories not as biased, flawed accounts of the civil wars, or at best as useful footnote material: instead, historians have become interested in how Catholic and Protestant authors collected their evidence, what narrative they presented and how readers responded to them.

Although printed histories and engravings were doubtlessly important in preserving a record of the past, they also pose obstacles to historians wishing to understand how the troubles survived in popular consciousness. At a time when the majority of the French population was illiterate, the memories of men and women who had lived through the wars were shaped less by official histories than by their own experience and the stories they had heard—what Daniel Woolf has called ‘the social circulation of the past’.⁸ Indeed, we still know very little about the distinctions between national and local memory practices; how memories varied throughout the social hierarchy, among individuals and groups, or within and between confessions; and what long-term impact wartime memories had on French society. In recent years, historians have therefore turned to local and personal memories, asking how individuals and communities throughout the kingdom remembered the civil wars. They have also broadened the memory landscape, exploring such diverse evidence as private memoirs, cheap print, picture galleries, monuments, processional music and church bells, all of which served as vectors of popular memory.⁹ Taken together, this recent scholarship has suggested that, despite the attempts of royal officials and elite historians to promote peace, the legacy of the French Wars of Religion remained highly divisive on a popular level, as memories of past conflict helped to solidify confessional identities and perpetuate tensions between Catholics and Protestants.

guerres de religion: la concurrence des genres historiques, XVI^e–XVIII^e siècles (Geneva, 2007); P. Benedict, H. Daussy and P.-O. Lechot (eds), *L'Identité buguenote: faire mémoire et écrire l'histoire (XVI^e–XXI^e siècle)* (Geneva, 2014). See also the classic study by O. Ranum, *Artisans of Glory: Writers and Historical Thought in Seventeenth-Century France* (Chapel Hill, 1980).

⁸ D. Woolf, *The Social Circulation of the Past: English Historical Culture, 1500–1730* (Oxford, 2003). On early modern popular memory: A. Wood, *The Memory of the People: Custom and Popular Senses of the Past in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2013); J. Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1800* (Oxford, 2018).

⁹ S. Broomhall, ‘Reasons and identities to remember: composing personal accounts of religious violence in sixteenth-century France’, *Fr Hist*, 27 (2013), 1–20; B. Diefendorf, ‘Religious conflict and civic identity: battles over the sacred landscape of Montpellier’, *Past & Present*, 237 (2017), 53–91; T. Hamilton, ‘The procession of the League: remembering the wars of religion in visual and literary satire’, *Fr Hist*, 30 (2016), 1–30; T. Hamilton, ‘Recording the wars of religion: the “drolleries of the League” from ephemeral print to scrapbook history’, *Past & Present Supplement*, 11 (2016), 288–310; D. van der Linden, ‘Memorializing the wars of religion in early seventeenth-century French picture galleries: Protestants and Catholics painting the contested past’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 70 (2017), 132–78; D. van der Linden, ‘The sound of memory: acoustic conflict and the legacy of the French wars of religion in seventeenth-century Montpellier’, *Early Mod Fr Studies*, 41 (2019), 7–20; D. van der Linden, ‘Archive wars: record destruction and the memory of the French wars of religion in Montpellier’, *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 51 (2020), 129–49.

This special issue not only identifies emerging research on popular memories of the French Wars of Religion as an important new direction in scholarship on the civil wars, it also brings together historians from France, Britain and the United States to further explore both local and long-lasting legacies of the wars. The articles gathered here contest the established view that the transition to peace after 1598 was important primarily because of the policy of forgetting that reinforced the authority of the French monarchy. Instead, they consider manuscript networks, courtroom testimony, family memory and local histories to analyse the ways in which ordinary people's lived experience shaped how memories were transmitted over generations. In doing so, the contributors to this special issue demonstrate that memories of the wars circulated well beyond the narrow confines of erudite national histories, and could survive even after the wartime generation had passed away.

While the contributions to this issue are united by their local approach, the authors also offer poignant insights into the construction and circulation of memories in the wake of conflict more broadly. A major theme running through the articles is the tension between remembering and forgetting. Tom Hamilton's article on courtroom testimony is a case in point: he shows that even though the Edict of Nantes ordered French subjects to bury the memory of the troubles, it paradoxically also offered a loophole to remember the wars. Articles 86 and 87 allowed particularly atrocious crimes—such as rape, pillage and murder committed on private initiative—to be prosecuted in court, which necessarily required defendants, prosecutors and witnesses to dredge up painful memories. A case study of the trial of the royalist military captain Mathurin de La Cange reveals that French men and women actively used the law to remember the troubles and settle scores over disputed wartime events.

Scholars in the field of memory studies more generally have argued that memorializing the past necessarily implies oblivion, because people will select only the most memorable events for safekeeping while discarding others. According to Jan and Aleida Assmann, people typically draw on a vast reservoir of what they call communicative and archival memory—comprising all the memories circulating at a given moment—to construct a more selective cultural memory.¹⁰ Several of the articles in this special issue speak to this process of selection and re-imagining of past events: they show that Catholics and Protestants in post-war France constructed partisan narratives of the troubles, editing out unwanted episodes while emphasizing their own victimhood and ostracizing their opponents.

As Gautier Mingous argues in his article on the legacy of the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre in Lyon, the process of constructing partisan memories had already taken place during the wars. Surviving Protestants were quick

¹⁰ J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich, 1992); A. Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich, 2006); A. Erll, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen: Eine Einführung* (Stuttgart and Weimar, 2005).

to frame the massacre as a tale of martyrdom and continuous oppression, while Lyon's Catholic city councillors—who had failed to curb the violence—relied on networks of correspondence to wash their hands of responsibility and blame the royal governor, Mandelot. It was the Protestant version of events that would ultimately triumph, however, as reports of the massacre found their way into successive editions of the *Livre des martyrs*. The canonization of the wartime past was also evident in the many urban histories published after 1598, as discussed by Barbara Diefendorf. Her analysis of nearly sixty histories reveals that Catholic authors continued to demonize their former opponents well into the eighteenth century, portraying their coreligionists as the victims of Protestant iconoclasm and defending the massacres as legitimate vengeance. Memories of the wars thus continued to be shaped along confessional boundaries, and this helped to fuel religious divisions long after the troubles had ended.

While most Catholics remembered the wars in confessional terms, not everybody stuck to the party line. Several of the articles here remind us that memory cultures were seldom monolithic, nor was confessional enmity the sole motivation for evoking the past. As Hilary Bernstein demonstrates, some Catholics questioned the memories revered within their own community. Her article takes as case study the memory war that erupted in seventeenth-century Le Mans over the so-called *terreur panique*. During the wars the Catholics had instituted a commemorative procession to celebrate the Protestants' sudden departure from the city in 1562, a miracle attributed to the town's patron saint, St Scholastique. In 1667, however, the Catholic lawyer Claude Blondeau became locked in a war of words with a local *curé* when he disputed the questionable historical evidence underpinning this memory. Blondeau argued that solid reasoning and verifiable sources took precedence over received wisdom, even if this validated Protestant claims. In a similar vein, Tom Hamilton's article cautions against the assumption that evoking wartime memories necessarily fuelled confessional hatred. He suggests that litigation in fact played a key role in transitioning France to peace: all parties involved in the trial against La Cange recognized the court as ultimate arbiter, thus turning the courtroom into a non-partisan forum for conflict resolution.

A third and final theme connecting these articles is the longevity of wartime memories, which were transmitted beyond the initial cohort of those who had lived through the Wars of Religion. Psychologists have long known that while traumatic events are often left unspoken by survivors—who are riddled by feelings of shame, guilt and anguish—their children might work to recover the buried past. Scholars studying the legacy of the Holocaust and of slavery in the United States have coined the terms 'intergenerational memory', 'transgenerational memory' and 'postmemory' to describe this delayed resurgence of narratives of victimhood and the inheritance of trauma by subsequent generations.¹¹ Building on these theories, historians of the early modern period

¹¹ For example M. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York, 2012); A. Stein, *Reluctant Witnesses: Survivors, Their Children, and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness* (Oxford, 2014); G. Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York, 2010); R. Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge, 2001).

have also begun to explore the long-term memory of the Reformation, analysing how later generations who had not witnessed the break-up of Christendom re-interpreted the religious turmoil of the sixteenth century.¹²

The articles in this special issue offer further evidence that early modern memories could have a long and tortuous afterlife, either wilfully passed down the generations in an attempt to avenge past injustices, or recovered after an initial period of silence. As Nicolas Breton demonstrates, the descendants of Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, whose murder in 1572 formed the grim prelude to the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre, never forgot the death of their *pater familias*. Coligny's widow, Jacqueline, and his children—in particular his son François—spent the rest of their lives avenging his death and re-asserting the family honour. By the next generation, however, family memory underwent a significant change: Coligny's grandson Gaspard de Châtillon gave up the family struggle and reconciled himself with the monarchy to seal the rifts opened up during the religious wars. The transmission and long-term survival of wartime memories also plays a key role in the articles by Diefendorf and Bernstein. Most of the local historians they discuss had never lived through the wars, yet they still deemed the religious troubles in their town worthy of remembrance, or even felt wronged by events that had taken place decades ago. Indeed, one of the striking conclusions of Diefendorf's article is that Catholics continued to vilify their Protestant opponents more than a century after the wars, long after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes had sealed the fate of French Protestantism in 1685. Given the continued, destructive presence of civil conflict in today's world, the articles in this special issue are thus a timely reminder that in order to achieve long-term reconciliation between former opponents, post-war societies must take seriously the management of traumatic memories—otherwise what is unforgettable may ultimately become unforgivable.

¹² A. Walsham, 'The Reformation of the generations: youth, age, and religious change in England, c. 1500–1700', *Trans of the Royal Hist Soc*, 21 (2011), 93–121; Y. Rodier, 'Fils de ligueurs et "enfants de la guerre": Pour une anti-mémoire de la Ligue au début du XVII^e siècle?', in *La Ligue et ses frontières: Engagements catholiques à distance du radicalisme à la fin des guerres de Religion*, ed. S. Daubresse and B. Haan (Rennes, 2015), 191–207. On the importance of family memory more generally: Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe*, 21–4; Woolf, *Social Circulation of the Past*, 73–137.