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The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes

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Abstract

On October 18, 1685, King Louis XIV of France signed into law the Edict of Fontainebleau. Its purpose was to revoke the Edict of Nantes, issued in 1598 by his grandfather Henry IV to end the French Wars of Religion. Referred to by historians as “the Revocation,” the Edict of Fontainebleau ended an unusual experiment in religious coexistence: whereas most early modern states allowed only a single form of worship, the Edict of Nantes had permitted France’s Protestant minority—known as Huguenots—to worship publicly alongside the Catholic majority. The Edict of Fontainebleau outlawed Protestant worship, while, in principle, allowing French Protestants freedom of conscience. But it followed upon a campaign of forced conversions, the *dragonnades*, in which soldiers were billeted in Huguenot households. The edict outlawed Huguenot churches and schools, and it ordered newborns to be baptized as Catholics. The edict also forbade Huguenots to leave France, with the exception of pastors. The aim of this entry is to explain why the Revocation took place, arguing that besides political factors, painful memories about the French Wars of Religion played a major role in the breakdown of religious coexistence. The entry reviews the Revocation’s historiography and describes what historians have identified as its long-term and more immediate causes. The entry concludes with an assessment of Louis’ efforts to root out Protestantism in his kingdom. It considers the situation of the 150,000 Huguenots who did flee France, one of the largest refugee movements of the early modern period. The entry discusses the opposition to Louis XIV in France in the form of ongoing clandestine worship and the Camisard revolt. The Revocation also led to an anti-French alliance of mostly Protestant powers, which resulted in the Nine Years’ War.

Keywords: Catholics; Edict of Fontainebleau; Edict of Nantes; France; French monarchy; Huguenots; Louis XIV; Protestantism; Refugees; Religious coexistence; Religious freedom; Religious persecution

On October 18, 1685, King Louis XIV of France signed into law the Edict of Fontainebleau. Its purpose was to revoke the Edict of Nantes, issued in 1598 by his grandfather Henry IV to end the French Wars of Religion. Referred to by historians as “the Revocation,” the Edict of Fontainebleau ended an unusual experiment in religious coexistence: whereas most early

modern states allowed only a single form of worship, the Edict of Nantes had permitted France's Protestant minority—known as Huguenots—to worship publicly alongside the Catholic majority. The aim of this entry is to explain why the Revocation took place, arguing that besides political factors, painful memories about the French Wars of Religion played a major role in the breakdown of religious coexistence. The entry concludes with an assessment of Louis' efforts to root out Protestantism in his kingdom, considering such consequences as the mass exodus of 150,000 Huguenots—one of the largest refugee movements of the early modern period—as well as political opposition to Louis XIV and ongoing clandestine worship.

1 The Edict of Fontainebleau

Whereas the Edict of Nantes was an elaborate legal document, comprising no fewer than ninety-two published articles and fifty-six secret articles that had been painstakingly negotiated between Catholic and Protestant delegates, the Edict of Fontainebleau was remarkably brief: it counts only twelve articles. Louis XIV's main aim was to revoke the Edict of Nantes and all privileges ever granted to the Huguenots (article 1), in particular the freedom to worship. Although the king was under no illusion that his Protestant subjects would suddenly become loyal supporters of the Church of Rome, he held out serious hope that future generations could be won over. He therefore prohibited schools from instructing Huguenot children (article 7) and ordered newborns to be baptized and raised in the Catholic faith (article 8). The edict also forbade Huguenots to leave the kingdom, while those who had fled prior to the Revocation were ordered to return within four months, on pain of having their possessions in France confiscated (articles 9 and 10). The king made an exception for Protestant pastors, whom he feared could preach resistance to his religious policies: they either had to convert or to leave France within a fortnight (article 4). Finally, the king reiterated earlier decrees against the so-called *relaps*, Protestant converts to Catholicism who had subsequently reneged on their conversion, a crime that was punishable by imprisonment or serving on the galleys (article 11).¹

Despite the formal outlawing of Protestant worship (articles 2 and 3) and the destruction of Huguenot churches (article 1), the edict did grant French Protestants freedom of conscience, allowing them to live in France unmolested so long as they refrained from organizing church services and prayers (article 12).² This particular article created serious dilemmas, however, because how were Huguenots supposed to uphold their beliefs when public worship was prohibited and their ministers exiled? Catholic officials were equally puzzled: while the edict seemed to preclude the forced conversion of Protestants, the years immediately preceding the Revocation had in fact witnessed state-sanctioned religious persecution. Between 1681 and the summer of 1685, the intendants of the provinces Poitou, Dauphiné, Béarn, and Languedoc had successfully employed *dragonnades*, the billeting of soldiers in Huguenot households to force them to abjure their beliefs.³ However, article 12 turned out to be a ruse; it was probably designed to placate foreign Protestant rulers who had protested these persecutions. In a frank letter to the intendant of Normandy, the secretary of war the Marquis of Louvois admitted that the Edict of Fontainebleau was never intended to shield the Huguenots from conversion. "They believe that the last clause protects them against what has been practiced up until now to induce the Protestants to convert," Louvois wrote. However, he ordered the intendant to be unyielding: "You must be more severe against those who appear the most stubborn to you, and billet more soldiers in their homes, in order

to better disabuse them of the false idea they have of this edict.”⁴ The months following the Revocation did indeed witness additional *dragonnades* taking place across France, which resulted in the mass abjuration of Protestants. They became, in Catholic parlance, *nouveaux convertis* (new converts).

2 The revocation explained

Historians continue to debate the reasons why Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes. The king himself, in the preamble to the Edict of Fontainebleau, explained that the Revocation was the logical culmination of the religious policies of the French monarchy. He argued that Henry IV had only issued the Edict of Nantes as a stopgap measure to restore peace and tranquility after four decades of civil war, rather than allowing permanent toleration of the Protestant faith. Foreign wars had subsequently prevented Louis XIII from accomplishing this goal, but since France had recently concluded peace with the Dutch Republic and Spain, Louis XIV now found himself in a position “to accomplish the designs of our said grandfather and father, which we have consistently kept before us since our succession to the crown.” Taking care not to evoke the *dragonnades* that had precipitated the recent mass conversions, the king rather disingenuously noted that “the greater part of our subjects of the so-called Reformed Religion have embraced the Catholic faith,” which meant the Edict of Nantes had become obsolete and might as well be revoked.⁵

In essence, Louis XIV identified both long-term religious policy and short-term political opportunity as motivations for revoking the Edict of Nantes. Both explanations have also been at the core of historians’ subsequent interpretations. Huguenot authors writing in the era of the Revocation—in particular pastors and intellectuals who had fled France—were quick to accuse the French monarchy and the Catholic clergy of a premeditated plot to destroy their communities. Shaped by the experience of persecution and flight, they created a “black legend” of the Revocation, tracing its origins to the beginning of Louis XIV’s rule. Élie Benoist, for example, an exiled Huguenot pastor from Alençon, noted in his *Histoire de l’Édit de Nantes* (1693–5) that during Louis’ coronation in 1654 the bishop of Montauban had publicly reminded the young king of his sacred duty to extirpate heresy in the kingdom. As Benoist argued, “this speech was the overture to the persecution that has endured from that time onwards to the present day, without interruption, and which has finally produced the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.”⁶

Modern scholarship has largely shared this Huguenot interpretation of the long-term origins of the Revocation, as historians have argued that the Edict of Nantes was never designed as a lasting solution to the problem of religious diversity. The ultimate aim of the monarchy, Jean Orcibal, Élisabeth Labrousse, and Mack Holt have argued, was to reconcile Protestants with the Church of Rome, not to install permanent religious coexistence. Like Louis XIV, they cite the preamble to the Edict of Nantes, which had expressed hope that religious pluralism was a temporary measure, “until it would please God to have all French men and women worship him in the same religion.”⁷ Historians have also stressed the religious intolerance of Louis XIV, arguing that pressured by the Catholic clergy, the king embarked upon a coherent campaign of anti-Protestant legislation to erode the position of his Protestant subjects—which Élisabeth Labrousse has called a “Cold War” against the Huguenots.⁸ These policy goals are set out in Louis’ memoirs, written for the instruction of his son between 1661 and 1672. The king explained that

the best means to reduce gradually the number of Huguenots in my kingdom was, in the first place, not to press them at all by any new rigor against them, to implement what they had obtained from my predecessors but to grant them nothing further, and even to restrict its execution within the narrowest limits that justice and propriety would permit.⁹

Although the Revocation can thus be explained as the logical outcome of the long-term policy goals of the French Crown, recent scholarship has put forward a different hypothesis, stressing the involvement of local communities and the legacy of the French Wars of Religion. The downside to looking back from 1685 is that the demise of Protestantism becomes an almost foreordained process—as if from 1598 onwards Catholics and Protestants were sleepwalking towards the Revocation. Instead, historians have argued that the memory of the French Wars of Religion offers another compelling reason for the breakdown of religious peace. They have pointed out that in the aftermath of the wars Catholics and Protestants developed sectarian narratives of what had happened, in particular regarding the massacres, sieges, and material losses that had taken place, victimizing their own community while assigning blame to the other. These rival memory cultures were subsequently passed down to generations who had not lived through the wars. By the 1660s, Catholics and Protestants throughout France were explicitly citing crimes committed during the religious wars to demand retribution. Trans-generational and partisan memories of civil war thus fed a culture of retribution long after the conflict had ended, provoking a new cycle of intolerance and violence during the reign of Louis XIV.¹⁰ The king explicitly referred to these painful memories in the preamble to the Edict of Fontainebleau, noting that one of his aims in revoking the Edict of Nantes was “to obliterate the memory of the troubles, the confusion, and the evils which the progress of this false religion has caused in this kingdom.”¹¹

Scholars have also shown that the reason why the Revocation occurred in 1685 owed much to short-term circumstances. On the domestic front, the success of the first *dragonnades* was an important stimulus for Louis XIV to complete the conversion of the Huguenots. Moreover, by 1683 Protestants in the Languedoc had begun openly to defy the French Crown: pastors organized open-air services on the ruins of destroyed churches, while some communities even armed themselves. In response, royal troops massacred around 4,000 Protestants in September and October 1683, burning their homes and destroying the few churches that remained. The Huguenots’ audacity in taking up arms, then, only convinced Louis XIV that more radical measures were needed to solve the “Huguenot question.”¹²

International politics also explain the timing of the Revocation. Because for most of his early reign Louis had been engaged in foreign wars, forcing the Huguenots to convert was out of the question, as it risked opening up a second, internal front. Yet the signing of the Treaty of Nijmegen (1678) with the Dutch Republic and the Truce of Regensburg (1684) with Spain and the Holy Roman Empire allowed Louis to focus his attention on the conversion of the Protestants. In addition, the king sought to improve his soured relationship with the papacy. The conflict dated back to 1673, when Louis XIV had extended his right to nominate French bishops and to cash their revenues whenever a benefice fell vacant (the so-called *droit de régale*). Although the Concordat of Bologna had formalized these privileges in 1516, France had meanwhile acquired new territories, to which Louis now sought to apply the *droit de régale*. Pope Innocent XI interpreted this move as further encroachment on papal authority, however, and retaliated by refusing to institute French bishops nominated by Louis XIV. The French king also wished to bolster his tarnished reputation as Europe’s most Christian king: in 1683 he had ignored calls from

Innocent XI to send troops for the relief of Vienna, which was besieged by Ottoman troops.¹³ Yet if the Revocation was partly a public relations operation, it failed to break the deadlock with Rome: although the pope congratulated the French king and organized a special Mass in Rome to celebrate the Revocation, he continued to withhold his support for bishops appointed by Louis XIV.¹⁴

3 Impact and consequences

When assessing the impact of the Revocation, scholars have convincingly shown that the French monarchy failed in its aim to root out religious dissent. Although in the short term Louis XIV succeeded with breathtaking speed in dismantling the Protestant infrastructure and forcing the Huguenots to convert, in the long term his policies proved counterproductive. French Protestantism managed to survive in the eighteenth century, until in 1789 the revolutionaries decreed religious freedom in France. This survival owed much to the flight of Huguenots abroad, where they enjoyed the support of Protestant rulers opposing the expansionist policies of Louis XIV, but also to those Huguenots who developed clandestine churches in France.

The first and most noticeable consequence of the Revocation was the mass exodus of Huguenots from France. As noted above, article 9 of the Edict of Fontainebleau strictly forbade Protestants to leave the kingdom, prompting local authorities to set up border patrols. In Normandy, for instance, eight navy ships and additional guards patrolled the coastline, while every ship descending the river Seine between Rouen and Le Havre was searched for Huguenot stowaways.¹⁵ Although these measures allowed French authorities to make some arrests, by 1700 an estimated 150,000 of France's 730,000 Protestants had managed to escape. They settled mostly in Switzerland, England, the Dutch Republic, and the German lands, with smaller groups travelling to colonial America and South Africa, thus forming a global diaspora known as the Huguenot *refuge*.¹⁶

Huguenot refugees have often been credited with strengthening the economy of their host nations while draining France of crucial resources and intellect. Recent scholarship, however, has shown that the economic losses incurred by the Revocation were limited: warfare and taxation were a far bigger drain on French royal finances, while Catholics quickly took over the trades hitherto dominated by Protestants. And although some refugees successfully built up a new life in exile, a great many more struggled to make ends meet on unfamiliar territory, relying on charity and low-paid jobs. Some even returned to France, disillusioned by life in exile and lured by Louis XIV's promise—first extended in article 9 of the Edict of Fontainebleau, and repeated many times thereafter—of recovering the homes and possessions they had left behind in France.¹⁷

A second, more tangible consequence of the Revocation was the cementing of an anti-French alliance. The Revocation sent a shockwave through Protestant Europe: news reports and visual propaganda decried the persecutions in vivid detail, while Huguenot refugees cultivated an identity of martyrdom to persuade Protestant authorities to grant them privileges, organize collections, and support the restoration of the Edict of Nantes.¹⁸ Such image-building also had political consequences, in particular in the Dutch Republic, where refugees lobbied stadtholder William III to further the Huguenot cause. Having risen to power during the French invasion of the Dutch Republic in 1672, William III styled himself as defender of the Protestant interest in Europe; fears of French and Catholic hegemony only solidified his position. In 1688, he subsequently invaded England to remove the Catholic

King James II from the throne, and formed an anti-French alliance of mostly Protestant powers who declared war on Louis XIV. Yet the resulting Nine Years' War (1689–97) failed to bring down Louis XIV and restore the Edict of Nantes, largely because the war ended in a stalemate. At the 1697 Peace of Rijswijk Louis XIV recognized William III as King of England, but he did not restore Protestant worship in his kingdom.¹⁹

Finally, the Revocation enjoyed only limited success within the French kingdom, as many Protestants kept alive their faith behind a façade of Catholic conformity. Bereft of pastors who had either converted or fled abroad, they organized their own secret gatherings to sing psalms and read out printed sermons, many of which were produced by pastors in exile and smuggled back into France. Over time, however, lay preachers known as *prédicants* as well as refugee ministers who slipped back into France began ministering to these underground communities, preaching, baptizing children, and performing marriages. In particular in the mountainous regions of southern France, where royal control was patchy, Huguenots assembled in fields, forests, valleys, and caverns—which they called *le Désert* (the wilderness), comparing themselves to the people of Israel wandering in the Sinai desert before God allowed them to enter the Promised Land.²⁰ Louis XIV's hope that over time the *nouveaux convertis* could be won over to Catholicism also proved illusory. By 1700, a generation of young Protestants had grown up who had no recollection of the Edict of Nantes and who had never seen a Huguenot church, yet who still campaigned to see Protestant worship restored. Led by the charismatic Jean Cavalier and inspired by prophecies that foretold the restoration of the Edict of Nantes, these so-called Camisards waged a war of attrition against the French monarchy in the southern mountain region of the Cévennes that would last until 1710.²¹ The Camisard revolt was eventually crushed, but the Protestant underground church endured. During the eighteenth century, Huguenots came to enjoy a large degree of de facto toleration, until in 1787 King Louis XVI recognized Protestant baptism and marriages as legal. In August 1789, finally, the deputies of the National Assembly voted in favor of the restoration of Protestant worship and decreed religious freedom in France.²² In the end, then, the French Revolution revoked the Revocation.

Notes

- 1 Patrick Cabanel, *Histoire des protestants en France (XVIe–XXIe siècle)* (Paris: Fayard, 2012), 625–29. The edict has been published in Léon Pilatte, ed., *Recueil des Édits, Déclarations et Arrests concernans la Religion P. Réformée, 1662–1751, précédés de l'Édit de Nantes* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1885), 239–45. For an English translation, see “Revocation of the Edict of Nantes,” Modern History Sourcebook, Fordham University, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1685revocation.asp> (accessed February 1, 2020).
- 2 Pilatte, *Recueil des Édits*, 244–5.
- 3 Élisabeth Labrousse, *Une foi, une loi, un roi? Essai sur la révocation de l'Édit de Nantes* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1985), 173–7; Roy L. McCullough, *Coercion, Conversion and Counterinsurgency in Louis XIV's France* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 125–79.
- 4 Louvois to Beuvron, Fontainebleau, November 8, 1685, Bibliothèque nationale de France Paris, Nouvelles acquisitions françaises 1206, fol. 8r. See also Cabanel, *Histoire des protestants*, 627–9.
- 5 Pilatte, *Recueil des Édits*, 239–41.
- 6 Élie Benoist, *Histoire de l'Édit de Nantes, contenant les choses les plus remarquables qui se sont passées en France avant & après sa publication, à l'ocasion de la diversité des religions* (Delft: Adriaan Beman, 1693–5), 3:184.

- 7 Labrousse, *Une foi, une loi, un roi?*, 28; Mack Holt, *The French Wars of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 166–7; Jean Orcibal, “Louis XIV and the Edict of Nantes,” in *Louis XIV and Absolutism*, ed. Ragnhild Hatton (London: Macmillan, 1976), 154–76.
- 8 Labrousse, *Une foi, une loi, un roi?*, 119–24. See also David J. Sturdy, *Louis XIV* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 92–4.
- 9 Louis XIV, *Mémoires for the Instruction of the Dauphin*, trans. Paul Sonnino (New York: Free Press, 1970), 56.
- 10 David van der Linden, “The Sound of Memory: Acoustic Conflict and the Legacy of the French Wars of Religion in Seventeenth-Century Montpellier,” *Early Modern French Studies* 41, no. 1 (2019), 7–20; Tom Hamilton and David van der Linden, eds., “Remembering the Wars of Religion,” special issue, *French History* 34, no. 4 (2020). See also Barbara Diefendorf, “Religious Conflict and Civic Identity: Battles Over the Sacred Landscape of Montpellier,” *Past & Present* 237, no. 1 (2017), 53–91; Philip Benedict, “Divided memories? Historical calendars, commemorative processions and the recollection of the wars of religion during the Ancien Régime,” *French History* 22, no. 4 (2008), 381–405.
- 11 Pilatte, *Recueil des Édits*, 241.
- 12 McCullough, *Coercion, Conversion and Counterinsurgency*, 133–50.
- 13 Sturdy, *Louis XIV*, 79–81; Labrousse, *Une foi, une loi, un roi?*, 194–5.
- 14 Jean Orcibal, *Louis XIV et les protestants* (Paris: Vrin, 1951), 139–47; Pierre Blet, “Les papes et la Révocation,” in *La Révocation de l’Édit de Nantes et le protestantisme français en 1685*, ed. Roger Zuber and Laurent Theis (Paris: Société de l’Histoire du Protestantisme Français, 1986), 266–74.
- 15 David van der Linden, *Experiencing Exile: Huguenot Refugees in the Dutch Republic, 1680–1700* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 23–4.
- 16 Myriam Yardeni, *Le refuge protestant* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985); Owen Stanwood, *The Global Refuge: Huguenots in an Age of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- 17 Warren C. Scoville, *The Persecution of Huguenots and French Economic Development, 1680–1720* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 434–47; Myriam Yardeni, “Naissance et essor d’un mythe: La révocation de l’édit de Nantes et le déclin économique de la France,” *Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 139, no. 1 (1993), 76–96; Van der Linden, *Experiencing Exile*, 39–78, 142–52.
- 18 Hans Bots “L’écho de la Révocation dans les Provinces-Unies à travers les gazettes et les pamphlets,” in *La Révocation de l’Édit de Nantes*, ed. Zuber and Theis, 281–98; Susanne Lachenicht, “Refugees and Refugee Protection in the Early Modern Period,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 30, no. 2 (2017), 261–81; Andrew C. Thompson, “The Protestant Interest and the History of Humanitarian Intervention, c. 1685–c. 1756,” in *Humanitarian Intervention: A History*, ed. Brendan Simms and D.J.B. Trim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 67–88.
- 19 Van der Linden, *Experiencing Exile*, 135–41; Peter Rietbergen, “William III of Orange (1650–1702) between European Politics and European Protestantism: The Case of the Huguenots”, in *La Révocation de l’Édit de Nantes et les Provinces-Unies, 1685*, ed. Hans Bots and G.H.M. Posthumus Meyes (Amsterdam: APA – Holland University Press, 1986), 35–50.
- 20 Didier Boisson, “The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the *Désert*,” in *A Companion to the Huguenots*, ed. Raymond Mentzer and Bertrand Van Ruymbeke (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 221–45.
- 21 W. Gregory Monahan, *Let God Arise: The War and Rebellion of the Camisards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 22 David Garrioch, *The Huguenots of Paris and the Coming of Religious Freedom, 1685–1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Boisson, “The Revocation and the *Désert*,” 239–45.

Further reading

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(Historical narrative of the Edict of Nantes by a leading refugee pastor in the Dutch Republic, presenting the Revocation as the culmination of a century of Catholic persecution.)

- Boisson, Didier. "The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the Désert." In *A Companion to the Huguenots*, edited by Raymond Mentzer and Bertrand Van Ruymbeke, 221–245. Leiden: Brill, 2016.
(A chronological survey of clandestine Huguenot life in France from the Revocation onwards, with particular attention on the *Désert*.)
- Chapell, Carolyon Lougee. *Facing the Revocation: Huguenot Families, Faith, and the King's Will*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
(Traces the fate and fortunes of the Protestant Champagné family to explain how individual Huguenots responded to the Revocation, as some stayed behind in France while others fled and rebuilt their lives in the diaspora.)
- Labrousse, Élisabeth. *Une foi, une loi, un roi?: Essai sur la révocation de l'Édit de Nantes*. Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1985.
(Classic study of the Edict of Nantes from its promulgation in 1598 until its demise in 1685, paying particular attention to the successive royal edicts that eroded Huguenot freedoms.)
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(This collection of essays offers a superb introduction to key themes in Huguenot history, covering both France and the diaspora.)
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(Essay analyzing the role of different actors in the Revocation, including the king, clergy, and leading magistrates.)
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(Comprehensive analysis of the Huguenot *refuge* in the Dutch Republic, focusing on the refugees' lived experience in exile. Chapters analyze the departure from France, the socio-economic make-up of the diaspora, refugee sermons and religious mentalities, and the practice of history-writing.)
- Zuber, Roger, and Laurent Theis, eds. *La Révocation de l'Édit de Nantes et le protestantisme français en 1685*. Paris: Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français, 1986.
(Key collection of essays focusing mostly on the Revocation in France, discussing the king's decision to revoke the edict, the bishops and intendants involved, and the immediate impact thereof in France and abroad.)