Book Review Essay

French Cities and Wars of Religion

Hilary J. Bernstein

Historical Communities, Erudition, and National Identity in Early Modern France.

Leiden: Brill, 2021. Pp. 435. Hb, €29.95/ \$34.95.

Christian Mühling

Le Débat européen sur la guerre de religion (1679–1714): Mémoire confessionnelle et politique internationale à l'époque de Louis XIV. Paris: Champion, 2021. Pp. 623.

Pb, €29.95.

At first glance these two hefty volumes would not seem to have much in common, but in fact they do. Writers of history who took up the task of writing about the past of their cities—that is, pamphlet writers and historians, city, royal, and imperial councilors, and outright hacks—all confronted powerful and sometimes life-threatening experiences during a religious war. The phrase “wars of religion” (Mühling considers it a “concept”) brings to mind the series of very hard-fought wars between Catholics and Protestants in sixteenth century France, 1562 to 1629. Mack Holt is correct in proposing the later date. The “Thirty Years’ War,” the “Nine Years War,” and the “War of Spanish Succession” do not contain the word “religion” in their names, but religion remained a strong presence all over Europe; and there was, of course, a crusading dimension to the war against the Turks that centered on the fates of Hungary and Vienna. In England, the phrase came to mind about the mid-century civil war that culminated in the execution of a king. John H. M. Salmon’s *The French Religious Wars in English Political Thought* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1959) confirms the power of the concept.

Hilary Bernstein begins her book with a remarkable report about historical thought in some sixty archives and libraries. She ends it by characterizing a

well-defined but previously obscure genre: local history. Lists of mayors, fragments from litigation, lists of privileges granted by feudal lords (among them kings), records of elections and deliberations by city councils, inventories of muskets, *hallebardes*, helmets, and militia lists are almost at the zero-degree of history, but they contain much historical thought. There are also letters from governors of provinces, letters from kings, tax records, and, of course, elements of *cadastres*.

To these papers must be added manuscript histories of cities, some of them brief and unfinished. They inevitably begin with the origin of the city, the roles it played in wars and sieges, and contestations over jurisdictions, rights, properties—often with bishops. All of this leads Bernstein to a simple but powerful observation: throughout the sixteenth century, cities called on history to sustain their identities.

After publishing *Crown and Community: Politics and Civic Culture* in 2004 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), in six articles Bernstein worked her way into the recognition that urban historical thought merited far more research: hence the *finding*—if not quite the *invention*—of local urban history. Over the decades, the number of narrative histories with the word “history” in the title perhaps suggested changes in legal training, shifts from oral to written culture, and a strengthening of urban identities that included a knowledge of their past. Titles with words such as “discourses,” “memoirs,” “methods,” “designs,” “chronicle,” and so forth, may still be found, but the noble word “history,” accompanied by the name of the city, appears more frequently after about 1560.

Finding a hitherto unfinished and unstudied local history must have given Bernstein a moment of excitement, regardless of whether the text was full of fiction and the style was weak. Curiosity is a trans-historical attitude. The authors of these texts were curious about the history of their cities. So is Bernstein.

City fathers, it seems, eagerly supported initiatives by a neighbor or a fellow city councilor, to do research and write a history, because the city’s renown would be enhanced. After all, prior to the divisions created by the Wars of Religion, there perhaps was nothing to hide.

For virtually all researchers, the search for the origins of the city, as they were mentioned for the first time in a chronicle, in Caesar, or on a stone unearthed by a well-digger, became the first topic. Discovering the earliest object became a veritable obsession in the Ancien Régime, because this proved that the city had been founded by the Gauls—that is, prior to a Frankish, a Roman, or a Phoenician invasion. It was the *summum bonum* of urban history. After all, Franks and Romans were conquerors. Tacitus’s *On Germany* seems to have been ignored, or was unknown to the researchers who were beginning to be learned provincials. Trojan origins were finally debunked. Keeping an eye

on the foundational claims of rival cities also remained a constant in their research.

There is reliance on contemporary understandings of the key concepts: “identity,” “community,” “national,” and “erudition,” all of which has the effect of enhancing meaning in the historical narrative. Claire Dolan (207) contends that when urban identities became stronger, the monarchy became weaker. Miriam Yardeni does not find this to be so, and Bernstein’s reviewer agrees with her. Our contemporary understanding of how identities can be conglomerated without strong counter-currents does not, however, neutralize their potential for motivating action. Maurice Agulhon found that individuals who did not quite feel accepted, or who felt different from their communities, would create new communities. Take, for example, the penitents or the Free Masons of the Ancien Régime. Might researchers into the histories of their cities be persons who did not feel at one with the city government? Or who had lost an election? Urban historians (Bernstein calls them that) shared information and posed questions to one another, as François Belleforest’s *Cosmogaphie* testifies.

The history of urban politics would be a back-and-forth accommodation with the crown and with other cities: see J. Russell Major’s work on the Renaissance monarchy: *From Renaissance Monarchy to Absolute Monarchy: French Kings, Nobles, and Estates* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994). The wars in Italy and the resistance against foreign incursions rallied cities to self-defense. It was a matter of pride as well as necessity.

Though they come a generation or two later than the pioneer urban historians, the research and writing of the history of the foundations of the church and the lives of patron saints occupied several members of the Society of Jesus. Philippe Labbe, from Bourges, had the support of the city fathers in 1647, as he verified completed earlier works about the city for his *Histoire du Berry*. He had used a similar approach in his *Géographie royale* of 1645. The debate over whether the Franks were really Gauls who had gone off to Eastern Europe, only later to return to France, captured his attention.

In Le Mans, storms over the origins of the bishopric and the first arrival of Saint Julien were at least partially calmed by Jesuit Jean-Baptiste La Barre, who came down in favor of oral tradition rather than documentary sources, and which shortened the history by two centuries. Jesuit Jean Bolland, the fourth bishop of Le Mans, landed squarely and generally acceptably, thanks to the city’s *foyer* of learned clerics whose transcribed sources indicated that the relics of St. Liboire had been taken to Paderborn, Germany, in 836. This strengthened the case for an earlier dating for the founding of the church in Le Mans.

In Chalon-sur-Saône, Jesuit Claude Perry took a different tack when he collected all the research of other erudites, to create a synthetic work on the city

and its province, Burgundy. He carefully thanked everyone from whom he had borrowed, thus contributing to a sociability among fellow researchers and history writers.

The history of early modern scholarship had probably over-emphasized controversies. Bernstein finds *honnêteté* in reaching out and sharing facts, ideas, and sources. A leader of this movement in Lyon was none other than Jesuit Claude-François Ménéstrier, whose circle of contacts extended over several eastern provinces and, no doubt, had contacts in Paris. Natalie Zemon Davis noted many years ago that books often belonged to so-and-so, "and to his friends."

Jean Rogier, up in Reims, undertook to write the city's history, and he somehow gave the city fathers the impression that he would surmount the obstacle posed by recounting events in a deeply-divided community. After the search for antique origins, the theme of unity remained primordial for most writers of city histories. This could not, however, be accomplished for Reims. Rogier died before he could finish his work.

Then André Duchesne arrived on the scene, visited Reims, and accepted subsidies from the city fathers; but in the end he took a pass. Relations between the city fathers and the archbishops had been confrontational for centuries. How could challenges over jurisdictions be narrated for readers, without destroying the theme of community?

Greater attention to the dedications of published works (118 and 124) might have provided more personal information about the writers and their relations with their cities. The question of selling books is raised by Bernstein—and rightly so when it comes to Duchesne, whose works range over a variety of topics from genealogies to translations of Juvenal's *Satires* or to writing a history of France. There is an aroma of market consideration here, especially when Sébastien Mabre Duchesne's most frequent publisher-printer, Cramoisy, is mentioned. Certainly, one of the most prestigious of the French publisher-printers, and perhaps the richest as well, Duchesne may have received something less than encouragement from Cramoisy about the projected history of Reims. Would a resident of Toulouse buy such a book?

Bernstein's final chapter recounts how the divisions and the violence of the Wars of Religion put to a test the understanding of urban communities and historical writers. How does one narrate events such as the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre? Mentioning only violence committed by Catholics, or solely violence committed by Protestants, was not an option. The living knew more history than could be written. Divine Providence punished one side or the other. (Was the diabolical not an alternative?) Summoning the courage to use Protestant sources about their own cities laid urban historians open to strident criticisms. As the studies of Philip Benedict, Amy Graves-Monroe, and Barbara

Diefendorf have shown, Simon Goulart's publications of actual sources, narratives, and illustrations attracted historians, political leaders, and general readers alike. Still, writing history as if nothing tragic had happened had become impossible. In the 1580s and 1590s, being at least one generation away from the facts—and perhaps two?—would permit a critical attitude toward disinformation.

Even at a distance in time, close readings of Claude Blondeau on civil-war events at Le Mans, and François Le Maire's account of those at Orléans a century later, capture the difficulties raised by religious conflict and civil violence. Published in 1667, Blondeau's *Invasion of the City of Le Mans* is admittedly contentious: he clearly had consulted Protestant sources. And there is a *libertin* atmosphere in his attack on popular beliefs: he debunks histories that recount stories such as the violence heaped on the cathedral canons. Blondeau admits to having read the works of Voisin de la Popelinière and those of Bèze as well, while invoking the ways of Divine Providence.

Le Maire's several works on Orléans appeared in the 1640s, with the understanding that over the centuries the city had a special destiny: to assure the survival of the monarchy. His narrative of course includes Joan of Arc, a heroine who is not a conqueror but plays a role in the defense of the realm. Le Maire's admission to having used sources written by heretics became a touchstone for critical history. At the same time, he admits to having emphasized the suffering of humanity—and who does so in a manner that calls to mind Jacques-Auguste de Thou and his *Histoire universelle*. The pursuit of truth, that venerable classical ideal, inspires Le Maire's account of how his city relates to the French monarchy.

On the front cover of Bernstein there is an illustration of the famous antique arch in Reims that is known as the *Porte de Mars*, the "Mars Gate." It was, a "castle" and it belonged to the archbishop, although it had been walled up in 1356 (305). Had it been reopened by the time the illustration was made? Inexpensive repairs can be seen in the small stones of the upper part, and the broken columns testify to its history as a fortification: the gate is as much a monument as it is a fortification that has been attacked. The market stall to the right, and the small gates enable the viewer to appreciate the size of the arch. There is no one on the street. Not even a dog. Is the artist-engraver indicating the deep divisions in the city?

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Christian Mühling begins his study of the term or phrase "wars of religion" by looking closely at its use as a concept in seventeenth-century French, English, and German historical and pamphlet literature. His harsh critique of the

magisterial volumes written and edited by Werner Conze, Otto Brunner, and Reinhart Koselleck, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Klett-Cotta Verlag Stuttgart, 1972–92), is not explained. This leaves open the possibility that this is like a refusal to use Protestant sources. Do political resonances, especially about Conze, justify not citing that work? (It is in the bibliography.) In its place, Mühling proposes following the more recent works on concepts by Koselleck, and John G. A. Pocock, both of whom emphasize close historical conceptualization. The inference is that close reading is the preferred method. Analysis centered on key words is also rejected; but although “wars of religion” is made of three related words, Mühling often reduces his context and turns it into a key word.

Some three hundred sources were gleaned online from seven major libraries. Seventy percent of the books are in French, ten percent are in English, and the rest are in German. Very few books are in Latin. It is correct to note that, after the Peace of Westphalia, French increasingly became the language of political discourse. However, if the very rich collections of the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel had been consulted—perhaps the collection called *Extravaganza*?—the percentage of works in German might have been greater. After all, the librarian was the great Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who participated in the pamphlet wars by attacking Louis XIV. Leibniz does not appear in Mühling, perhaps because the expression “wars of religion” does not appear? François-Paul de Lisola, an influential pro-imperial pamphleteer, may have met the same fate for failing to include “wars of religion.” See the excellent introduction to the themes of this book by Joseph Klaitz, *Printed Propaganda under Louis XIV* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

Censorship and Louis XIV’s bellicose policies muffled voices in France and certainly heightened references to “wars of religion,” but the use of the expression depended strongly on well-established Catholic attitudes about war. Memories of warring against heretics persisted in the centuries of the early church; and right down to the late seventeenth century there were crusades against Islam. François Eudes de Mézeray, the historiographer royal of France, called the conquest of Visigothic Gaul the “the first wars of religion.” His work had considerable influence, but his pension was cancelled and was never re-established. And in the church, there was, of course, evangelism without violence, and persuasion in favor of peace; but in Catholic memories, specific wars to preserve or strengthen the faith came to mind.

The Protestant political memory likewise centered on evangelism and persuasion, but critiques of corruption in the Catholic Church could be perceived as forces to be rooted out. Nonetheless, Martin Luther was perceived as a man of peace (*pace* peasants). In the French Wars of Religion, generals such as Louis

I de Bourbon-Condé and Gaspard II de Coligny were heroicized, as Gustavus Adolphus would later be; but over the decades, and especially in France, loyalty to reigning kings became a *leit motiv* despite oppressive war-making against them. The violence provoked by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and the Camisard war, prompted many writers to refer to “wars of religion” (plural), owing to the high emotional valence of the term. Exemplarity in divine intervention. Princes who combat heresy are among God’s elect. This would lead to disputes about who was a martyr. The Guise brothers were “executed” by their king; they certainly were Catholic martyrs, just as Condé and Coligny were in the eyes of Huguenots.

Perhaps so familiar that it is not recalled as a determinant, is the French-Austrian imperial rivalry that, since at least the late fifteenth century, had framed diplomatic discourse and very often military actions as well. The siege of Vienna formally became a crusade; the Sun King (like Francis I) hemmed and hawed about support for the Catholic cause in Hungary. Was Louis XIV deliberately carrying out a “war of religion”? His aim certainly seemed to be universal monarchy, and the European states, both Protestant and Catholic, joined to defeat him.

In England, the more immediate resonances of the French Wars of Religion would strengthen anti-Catholicism and would temporarily destabilize Anglican exceptionalism by a civil war. In his *Oceana*, James Harrington inveighed against the popes as “anti-Christ” who kindled wars in order to maintain and increase their power. His views would be taken up by Pierre Bayle and David Hume. Anti-Jesuitism remained strong for decades, prompting proposed plots and xenophobic texts. England’s civil wars were certainly about religion. Memories had to be jogged when James II proclaimed the toleration of Catholics. This would unleash the peaceful revolution of 1688, as the Most Christian Turk, Louis XIV, revealed his true Catholic colors when welcoming the Stuart king and his family to France.

Some diplomatic and military events could simply not be explained by religious differences. The Bavarian Wittelsbachs stood squarely with Louis XIV as Catholics, against their non-neighborly Catholic Hapsburg neighbors. After 1702, the War of Spanish Succession again mobilized the Catholic states of Europe (except Spain) against Louis XIV. The Dutch and English Protestants joined as well. Louis XIV’s war with the pope and the papal states of Europe once again sent pamphleteers to their history books in search of previous examples of such violence.

In what texts do we find such major figures as Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, Pierre Jurieu, Bayle, and Maimbourg? Briefly and convincingly, Mühling elucidates their writings; he becomes engaged in the debates, to the point of

questioning whether Jurieu had been misinterpreted by some of his contemporaries—an essentially different issue.

It is always difficult to believe that someone could be tempered and rational in some works, and inflammatory to the point of hysteria in others. The Huguenots' argument about fidelity to the king and the right to resist did not cohere. Louis XIV, by revoking the Edict of Nantes, indicated that he had come completely under the influence of his Jesuit confessor, Father La Chaise, and was carrying out a war of religion against Protestants. Jurieu claimed that there were Jesuits in all the courts of Europe, advising and fighting in favor of the Franco-Jesuit alliance. Were they not trying to poison Emperor Leopold? Warned, the possible victim shrugged it off and remarked that he held the Jesuits in esteem. Jurieu repeats canards about assassination plots that do not square with the alliance structures against Louis XIV. James II of England, a refugee who had lost his throne, was said to be completely dominated by his Jesuit advisors and had perhaps become one himself. His fidelity to Catholics, and to the Jesuits in particular, eventually prompted the English Parliament's Test Act, which made it illegal for Catholics to serve in any government post. There have been many recent readings and re-readings; the minor classic by G. H. Dodge elucidates continuities and coherences in Jurieu's thought.

As the wars dragged on, writers and readers increasingly had in mind the "wars of religion," that is, the French wars of the later sixteenth century, in lieu of the Schmalkaldic War of the 1540s. But civil wars in England, France, and the Netherlands seemed to be less "wars of religion." Indeed, historians such as Élie Benoist paid increasing attention to aristocrats as initiators of civil war. An aristocratic party in England joined with Dutch elites to secure the English throne for Protestantism, and William of Orange came to be viewed as their protector. The most frequently cited writers in this book are Matthäus Göbel, Martin Luther, Pierre Jurieu, and Gregorio Leti. A successful range of the familiar and the obscure.

Was the climate of opinion changing in the 1680s as a result of the eloquent darts being aimed at Louis XIV for what appeared to be the creation of a universal monarchy thanks to bullying and war? Can a metaphorical phrase wear thin as a result of over-use and failure to oblige the war-makers to change policies?

The political culture in England changed rapidly: not long before the peaceful revolution of 1688. No writer was more influential at this point than the personal physician to one of the king-makers in the realm: Shaftsbury. In a series of short works, John Locke not only offered a critique of the powers that established religions exerted over souls, he also defined tolerance as an individual question and grounded it on the conscience. Very quickly, what had been a

medical term (How much mercury can the body tolerate?) became a political concept. At first Locke did not include toleration for Catholics, because they owed loyalty to the pope and the Jacobite party. He later changed his mind, but all along he believed that all Protestants would be living together in peace. If only the French kings had allowed Protestants to worship as they wished, there would not have been those wars of religion that still came to mind when one encountered the term while reading a book.

There is some attention to the northern wars. John Toland thought of Charles XII of Sweden as another Gustavus Adolphus who could descend into the middle of Europe and defeat Louis XIV. Punishing Denmark and Poland, and trying to defeat Russia, would eventually occupy the Swedish king.

Christian Mühling has accomplished much by his careful attention to specific contexts in a sea of ideas, personalities, and institutions. His energy and care come together to make understandable both rhetorical and moral dimensions. After all, the study of a phenomenon that has neither beginning nor end requires a special quality of mind.

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