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The Huguenots

After the Protestant [Reformation](#) began in Germany (1517), the reform movement spread quickly in France, especially in places that had suffered economic depression and among those who had grievances against the established order of government. The first Huguenot community in French territory, that of [Meaux](#), was founded in 1546 on the model of the Strassburg community. The Huguenot church in Paris was founded about 1555, and in spite of persecution the Reformers increased in numbers.

Finally the Protestant church at Paris was commissioned to summon the first [synod](#), held in 1559, which was attended by 72 deputies representing all the provinces of the kingdom. The deputies drew up a [confession of faith](#), which was greatly influenced by the ideas of John Calvin; the synod of 1559 was also the beginning of a remarkable quantitative increase in the Reform movement. At that synod 15 churches were represented; two years later, in 1561, the number was 2,150—an increase that carried the struggle into the arena of national politics. After a number of Huguenots assembling for worship in a barn at Vassy were massacred by soldiers of the Roman Catholic [Guise](#) family, Condé declared that there was no hope but in God and arms. At [Orléans](#) on April 12, 1562, the Huguenot leaders signed the [manifesto](#) in which they stated that as loyal subjects they were driven to take up arms for liberty of conscience on behalf of the persecuted saints.

Thus began a period of confusion and violence in France, known as the [Wars of Religion](#), that lasted until almost the end of the century. The need to legitimize the direct attack on the Valois monarchy began to call forth the classic texts of revolutionary Huguenot political thought. The first to appear was Hotman's *Francogallia*. Another manuscript was published around the same time by Theodore Beza, *The Right of Magistrate* in 1574. Later in 1574, three further tracts of importance appeared, all in French and all by writers whose identities have remained unknown. The first was a dialogue entitled *The Politician*. The second also in dialogue form was called *The Awakener*, while the third, *Political Discourse*, was the most revolutionary of all, presenting a more anarchic theory of resistance than any other work of Huguenot political thought. Finally, was published the *Defence of Liberty against Tyrants* by Philippe Mornay (1549-1623), which gives the fullest summary of all the major arguments developed by Huguenots in the course of 1570s.

Although the main aim of these tracts was undoubtedly to justify a direct attack on the Valois monarchy, it is important to add that even after the massacre of 1572, the Huguenots were still anxious to exclude any idea of resistance by individuals or even by the whole body of the people. Mornay concedes that 'by means of his divine justice,' God may sometimes send us a *Jehu* in order to 'over turn and deliver us from the tyrants.' But he repeatedly stresses that 'where God has not spoken' in this way, any man who feels 'called' to exercise such a grave responsibility 'must be circumspect and sober' since he runs the terrible risk that may 'confuse himself with God.' Even after 1572, the Huguenots insisted on their purely defensive character of their resistance by stressing as much as possible that the withdrawal of their allegiance was a move forced on them by the utter vileness of Catherine de Medici's government. They started the rumour that the massacre at St Bartholomew had been carefully

planned conspiracy, executed with the deliberate intention of exterminating the Protestants in France. Emphasising on the tyranny of the government, the Huguenots were able to present their decisions to resist as nothing more than a necessary and hence legitimate act of self defence.

Francis Hotman was to describe his book as 'a historical book, the history of a fact.' The basic assumption is that the crown of France was originally bestowed entirely by the will of the people's representatives, with each successive king being constituted by the authoritative decision of the Estates rather than by any hereditary right.' The right of election must by no means be treated as a single act of sovereignty which the people relinquish as soon as it is exercised. People's representatives must be acknowledged to retain a right of constant surveillance for he repeatedly insists that in as much as it was the right and power of the estates and the people to constitute and maintain kings under the ancient constitution. Hotman argues that 'the supreme power not only of transferring but also of taking away the kingdom lay within the competence of the assembly of the people and the public council of the nation'. Finally, he adds the further general claim that since the Estates must at all times be recognised as possessing the power 'to set kings down as well as to set them up,' it follows that the status of the king of France can never be higher than that of a magistrate of the whole people, a mere official appointed to serve as a presiding officer at the meetings of the Estates General. Under the ancient constitution, the nature of the relationship between the king and the Estates is thus said to be that the authority of the council was greater than that of the king, who was assigned all power in the manner in which the Roman people gave it to the Emperors.' The outcome of Hotman's historical analysis is thus a theory of popular sovereignty in which the highest administrative authority in the kingdom is said to be vested at all times in 'the assembly of the three Estates.'

The author of *The Awakener*- discusses the power of the representative assemblies to 'set up and set down kings', he offers an exact analogy 'the rein and the bridle' constituted by the ephors of ancient Sparta, 'to whom it was lawful to condemn and chastise their kings when they abused their office'. Beza involves the same analogy with kings elected with definite conditions by the Spartans together with the ephors to keep them in check in the *Right of Magistrates*. And Mornay's *Defence* reiterates the underlying idea that the power of the representative assemblies is in fact 'ephoral' in character, as well as adding the purely historical but political suggestive fact that in a sense the Spartan ephors were 'more powerful than the Spartan kings'.

Mornay discusses the typically scholastic idea of a contract between the king and the representatives of the people. This is analysed in the third *Quaestio*, which examines the purely political question of whether a prince who oppresses or devastates a commonwealth may be lawfully opposed. But the other covenant he discusses is the specifically Protestant idea of a contract in two parts between the king, the inferior magistrates and God. The first part of this agreement, is said to be between God and the king'. We are assured that, 'all kings are ministers ordained by God to govern justly and rule on His behalf.' We are told that this ordination takes the form of a covenant 'regularly concluded between the king and God' by which the king promises to ensure that his commands are not in conflict with God's law.' The other part of the agreement which is taken up is described as a covenant between God and the people'. God regards it as dangerous to entrust the supreme duty of maintaining his Church 'to a single all-too human individual,' and has accordingly decided to ordain not merely kings to rule but also 'magistrates below the king to ensure that the kings duties are properly fulfilled. The outcome of this two- fold system of contacts is that Mornay arrives at

two distinct justification of resistance. One arises out of the scholastic idea that because the people create their rulers on set terms, they must always retain a right of resistance if these terms are not honoured. But the other arises out of a different and incompatible view about the origins and purposes of the common wealth. Both the king and the inferior magistrates are said to have promised to uphold the true Church and the law of God. If the king fails in this duty it falls to the inferior magistrates to resist him.

((The Paris massacre was repeated throughout France, and Protestants were slain in thousands. The Protestant survivors resolved upon a desperate resistance, and a Huguenot [political party](#) was formed at Milhau, near [Nîmes](#), in 1573. Especially prominent was [Philippe de Mornay](#), known as Duplessis-Mornay. The Huguenots at first hoped that the crown of France would pass to a Huguenot; when that became obviously impossible, they fought for full religious and [civil liberty](#) within the state

War was resumed after the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day and continued, with short-lived intermissions, throughout the reign of the unpopular Henry III, who succeeded Charles IX in 1574. Henry's hesitations encouraged the formation of the powerful [Holy League](#) against the Huguenots; and, after the assassination of Henry III in 1589, his successor, the Protestant heir [Henry IV](#), could pacify the kingdom only by adjuring [Protestantism](#) (July 1593), accepting Catholicism, and thus depriving the League of its pretext for resisting him. The Huguenots after 40 years of strife obtained by their constancy Henry IV's promulgation of the [Edict of Nantes](#) (April 1598), the charter of their religious and political freedom.

Civil wars, however, occurred again in the 1620s under King [Louis XIII](#). Eventually the [Huguenots](#) were defeated, and the [Peace of Alès](#) was signed on June 28, 1629, whereby the Huguenots were allowed to retain their freedom of conscience but lost all their military advantages. No longer a political entity, the Huguenots became loyal subjects of the king. Their remaining rights under the Edict of Nantes were confirmed by a royal declaration in 1643 on behalf of the infant king, [Louis XIV](#).)