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Volume III (1500-1800): Part 6: Religious, Sacred and Ritualized Violence

Chapter 27: Inter-Communal Violence in Europe

It is hard to dispute that the religious movement (or process of religious change) known as the European Reformation caused division and displacement on an unprecedented scale. Yet, it is all too easy to overstate the frequency and ubiquity of the violence that it produced. A more nuanced approach is required to interpret and explain the variability and complexity of this response. Certainly, communal violence in early modern Europe was profoundly shaped by the Reformation. Itself a violent rupture in the unity of Christendom, it stimulated a range of confessional tensions which provoked and justified inter-communal strife. This violence ranged from the trading of verbal insults to the destruction of sacred images and even to full-blown massacre. However, while the threat of violence hung over social relations in many communities, it only occasionally erupted into assaults on objects, property and people, which were often highly ritualized. The story of communal violence in early modern Europe, then, follows a familiar pattern, with the differences largely of scale rather than substance. Yet national historiographies have tended to highlight the differences rather than the similarities. Although there is substantial variation in their extent and brutality, according to the various political, social and cultural configurations of the communities involved, there are many common aspects to the violent acts perpetrated in the name of religion. Official direction and popular initiative may vie for our attention in understanding these aspects, but it is not always possible, or straightforward, to identify or separate their role.

When we survey the landscape of inter-communal violence in early modern Europe, wherever we look, confessional tensions loom large. The Protestant Reformation resulted in the rapid proliferation of minority groups which, in the sixteenth century in particular, caused clashes with the majority confession and the authorities seeking to curb civil strife. Much of

the violence which characterized the Reformation was localised and personal. It affected existing and longstanding solidarities as neighbours and families were divided by the confessional tensions that arose. Its impact, within previously harmonious and stable communities, provides a clear demonstration of Anton Blok's claim that the 'fiercest struggles' often take place 'between individuals, groups and communities that differ very little'.¹ This violence was often confined and small scale, caused by disputes over processions, the use of churches and bells, sites of worship and burial, iconoclasm and other devotional slights. Yet it could also be significant and widespread, as in the case of the German Peasants' War, the Dutch Revolt and the St Bartholomew's Day massacres in France. The outbreak of civil war added a new dimension to the context and extent of violence. It could intersect with and exacerbate other grievances, from the political to the socio-economic. Additionally, a challenge to the mainstream faith could be seen as a threat to the position of a ruler and questioned the minority's obedience to the forces of law and order in general as disturbers of the public peace. Having failed to eliminate the growth of Protestantism, which the Catholic Church viewed as a heresy, the authorities realised that some form of accommodation needed to be reached. Protestant rulers, too, had to navigate a path of toleration with those of their subjects who continued to uphold Catholicism in return for pledges of loyalty. As a result of these considerations, prosecution and punishment for treason became favoured over that for religious dissent. Offenders were to be treated as rebels against the polity rather than martyrs for their faith.

As regimes sought to incorporate the new reality of confessional coexistence, so the resentment towards, and tensions with, the majority faith grew, often resulting in episodes of unrest. Whatever their own stance, rulers and their officials were concerned to restrict and control spontaneous outbursts of popular violence whichever faith was involved. Indeed, the

¹ Anton Blok, *Honour and Violence* (Basingstoke, 2001), p. 5.

authorities could attract animosity even from their coreligionists if the often fiercely contested concessions made to the minority faith were believed to have gone too far. Thus, a simple dichotomy between more tolerant and more repressive regimes fails to capture the latent potential for violence amid officially-sanctioned coexistence. Claim and counter-claim dominated accusations of which side was responsible for episodic violence. The faiths condemned each other's actions while seeking to justify their own. Violent acts by opponents could justify more repressive measures against them. Descriptions of ritualized violence, in particular, were used to dehumanize and vilify the perpetrators, but historians have interpreted such rituals as crucial for our understanding and explanation of these actions. Even when the veracity of such reports is suspect, the cultural repertoire they reflect tells us much about the social mores which informed and exacerbated animosities that were not always or solely religious. These themes will be explored by focusing on the various forms of violence which were already present or developed within local communities and on the more large-scale confessional conflict which developed into civil war in significant parts of Europe.

Violence in the Community

Benjamin Kaplan and others have remarked on the importance of the public nature of the causes of confessional violence throughout Europe; 'the explosive potential of public religious acts was unmatched'.² It was offence done to the community, as much as the practice of another faith, which provoked a violent response. This involved processions through sensitive areas of towns, the carrying of weapons to services, verbal as much as physical confrontations, but also passive resistance by those not involved in the usual communal activities, absenting themselves from parish life and the liturgical cycle. Feast

² Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2007), pp. 78-9, 84-6, 97.

days, and significant events such as Corpus Christi (the annual celebration of that most divisive of theological subjects, the Eucharist), were flashpoints for violent confrontations between the faiths. In areas with a history of tension, there was always a certain amount of volatility around public holidays, in particular, and individual actions which caused offence could soon stir others to action. Non-participation, such as eating meat or working on fast days, or failing to decorate houses on the procession route or to respect the passing of the Host, were symbolic and provocative stances which invited a sometimes violent response. In France, in Clermont in Auvergne, at Corpus Christi 1568, a Protestant whose house was undecorated (as it was customarily required to be on feast-days), and who additionally was accused of throwing stones at the Host, was burned alive by a Catholic mob. Reactions were not often this extreme, but some form of insult or minor assault was commonplace, especially when suspicion and rumour were involved. Verbal exchanges and physical blows were part and parcel of confessional tensions. Tiles, stones, mud, ordure and even animals, such as cats (symbolic of unbridled sexuality), were all thrown at opponents in an attempt to humiliate and provoke. However, 'it took more than the existence of religious difference to make people start lynching their neighbours', and 'a violent popular response to the rise of Protestantism' was not inevitable.³ Even in the most volatile circumstances, violence was not an everyday occurrence, although the potential was always there wherever differences existed which could be exploited. Provocative behaviour was a visible source of many incidents of confessional violence, but such tensions could be defused by the use of active restraint and careful vigilance by the authorities.

Although the fundamental Reformation divide was between Protestant and Catholic, religious pluralism incorporated a myriad of beliefs (or multi-confessionalism) which needed to be practically accommodated in many regions. Nevertheless, in certain circumstances, acts

³ Judith Pollmann, 'Countering the Reformation in France and the Netherlands: Clerical Leadership and Catholic Violence 1560 –1585', *Past and Present*, 190 (2006), 119.

of violence could also occur in successfully mixed local communities. Indeed, Kaplan urges that we should consider toleration a pragmatic necessity which involved the regulation and containment of conflict rather than its elimination.⁴ Although largely stable, religiously diverse polities such as Transylvania, Prussia, Lithuania and Poland, witnessed violent clashes between Catholics, Orthodox, Calvinists and Lutherans as well as Antitrinitarians. On the whole, though, the populations of these areas of Central and Eastern Europe displayed more toleration, it is argued, due to their long experience of dealing with pluralism and diversity. Nevertheless, while on many occasions neighbours passed each other on the way to different churches without obvious signs of mutual hostility, the fragility of coexistence was ever-present and ‘apparently stable relations between religious communities could quickly be disrupted by episodes of violence’.⁵ In Vilnius (Wilno) in Lithuania, for instance, where there was a largely peaceful religiously pluralistic community of five confessions, there were still occasional clashes. Such incidents might lead to the closing or removal of churches, or even the suppression of a community, to defuse tensions or punish perpetrators. In Toruń, Prussia, in 1724, the leading Lutheran officials took the rap for failing to prevent an attack on the local Jesuit college, resulting in their execution. Local authorities were expected to intervene in disputes to maintain the peace whatever their own prejudices and, as in this case, could be expected to be punished if they were unwilling or unable to do so.

While there could be reconciliation and accommodation with some groups, others were beyond redemption. Particularly harsh punishments were reserved for those with the most radical views, collectively if erroneously termed Anabaptists, who were summarily executed in both Catholic and Protestant states for their unorthodox beliefs. Members of radical sects and their sites of worship were also singled out for attack. Their involvement in violent attempts to hasten change rapidly lost them sympathy with both the authorities and

⁴ Kaplan, *Divided by Faith*, pp. 8-9.

⁵ Laura Lisy-Wagner and Graeme Murdock, ‘Tolerance and Intolerance’, in Howard Louthan and Graeme Murdock (eds), *A Companion to the Reformation in Central Europe* (Leiden and Boston, 2015), pp. 471-2.

the populace alike and was used to justify their forceful suppression. An extreme religious group, the Old Believers in Russia, combined attacks on the Muscovite church with mass 'suicides' (in which victims did not always go to their deaths voluntarily), reminiscent of some fanatical cults of more recent times. Belying their passive reputation, they terrorized monasteries and civilians who did not comply with their commands. Like other non-mainstream religious groups, radicals were expelled or deported, sometimes forcibly, from territories. The ongoing if sporadic persecution of the Jewish communities of Europe also continued, including the segregation of the Prague ghetto, anti-Jewish violence of various sorts, and also many expulsions, such as from Vienna in 1669-70. In 1609, the order was given for the forced deportation of the *moriscos* (converted Muslims) from Spain to North Africa following episodes of brutal repression by the authorities in preceding decades.

Apocalypticism, Ritual and Carnival

Apocalyptic and millenarian beliefs permeated both Catholic and Protestant thought and were given added impetus by the destabilizing impact of the Reformation. Prophets and their prophecies inspired resistance and reprisal, as did the radical preacher Thomas Müntzer during the German Peasants' War of 1525, which resulted in the death of many thousands of peasants in revolt against their lords. Luther's condemnation of those who claimed to be acting in his name in his 'Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants' lent legitimacy to the violent suppression of the revolt by delegitimizing the use of force by the peasantry. Apocalypticism, the belief that the end of the world is imminent and, therefore, that preparation for the last days has to be hastened by whatever means, was at the root of much of the violence perpetrated by radical religious groups in early modern Europe, as notoriously at Münster in northern Germany in the mid-1530s. It is telling that Catholic and Protestant forces combined in the subsequent siege of the city and in the violent suppression

of the movement, which had introduced compulsory rebaptism and polygamy as well as expulsion or execution for those who resisted its directives. The cages in which the corpses of the messianic regime's leaders were placed after torture and execution were hung from the tower of the city's main church as a grisly reminder of the violent fate awaiting rebels against the establishment.

Even the passive withdrawal of religious groups from society, which was also often inspired by apocalyptic beliefs, antagonized the authorities who condemned such actions as seditious and harmful to the social order. The forced expulsion or dispersal of such communities was a common response, as was the case with the Hutterites in Central Europe. Like many other minority groups, including Jews, they were gradually forced further east, some choosing instead to seek refuge in North America. Violence carried out against Civil War sects in seventeenth-century England, such as the Levellers and the Diggers, further demonstrates the official condemnation of acts of non-conformity and social protest. On the other hand, impatience with and intolerance of those who appeared to be obstructing the divine plan led to violent acts by radical groups. All parties believed that divine providence was on their side, whether reflected in their defeat of opponents or in their own testing through persecution. Indeed, the role of providence in both provoking and explaining violence is clear from many studies, focusing on both Protestant and Catholic states. In sixteenth-century France, for instance, the trauma of civil war inspired lurid tales of unnatural violence and extreme cruelty, such as that perpetrated by parents against their children, and 'wonderbooks' of the period were obsessed by prodigious signs. The collapse of buildings and the sudden death of opponents were seen as providential indications of divine disapproval, as when a chapel in Blackfriars in London fell down in 1623, killing a Jesuit preacher and his congregation.

While many traditional beliefs continued to be embraced by both Catholics and Protestants, historians have emphasized differences between the faiths when it came to the use and application of violence. Our attention was first drawn to the specific focus of Protestants on the destruction of material objects and assaults on Catholic clergy, and the Catholic emphasis on the removal of the pollution of heresy through the killing of Protestants, by an article by Natalie Zemon Davis.⁶ It forms the basis of an influential ongoing debate about the nature of confessional conflict in early modern Europe. Drawing on anthropological and sociological approaches, Davis remarks in particular upon the apparent contrast between the ritualized violence used in the French religious wars by the faiths, with most of the bloodshed perpetrated by members of the Catholic majority against the Protestant minority. As Davis herself has pointed out, however, this dichotomy was never absolute. If we look elsewhere in Europe, too, members of the clergy were, unsurprisingly, a prominent target of popular religious violence in most regions. For instance, in Poland-Lithuania, in 1623, the Greek Catholic archbishop of Polatsk was murdered by an Orthodox crowd, his corpse dragged through the streets and dumped in a river, and hundreds of Greek Catholic priests were later killed during the Cossack uprising of 1648. Yet, it was not always so. Georg Michels' comparative analysis of the nature of popular religious violence against the official church in seventeenth-century Hungary and Russia argues that the marked differences to be found are due to context. In Hungary, iconoclasm and the ritual humiliation and torture of priests and their families, in response to the imposition of Catholicism in 1670s and '80s, is reminiscent of the ritualized violence of the Reformation years in much of Western Europe. Here, however, it was Protestants who carried out the most brutal acts, including 'various forms of sexual torture', even castration, of priests.⁷ In Russia, by contrast, the official

⁶ Natalie Zemon Davis, 'The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in sixteenth-century France', *Past and Present*, 59 (1973), 51-91.

⁷ Georg Michels, 'Rituals of Violence: Retaliatory Acts by Russian and Hungarian Rebels', *Russian History*, 35 (2008), 383-94 (quotations, 388-90).

imposition of a new Orthodox oligarchy inspired a more socio-economic response, focused on plunder and destruction and largely devoid of ritualized religious elements.

Nevertheless, ritualized violence was already a well-established feature of non-religious cultural practices throughout Europe. Popular culture was shaped by collective expectations of behaviour and the policing of local morals. Religious groups were, thus, able to draw on an existing repertoire of responses to inter-communal friction. The socio-cultural practice of charivari provided an outlet for community tensions, but it both ‘resolved conflict and furthered it’ and was ‘fraught with the potential for violence’.⁸ This is unsurprising, since it encompassed animosities and feuds, as well as grudges of various sorts, often conducted by gangs of young men. The public humiliation of cuckolded husbands or those beaten by their wives was a favourite pastime. But, combined with other resentments, mockery and derision could quickly lead to rough justice, blows and even murder. The rituals of Carnival, the disorderly festival preceding Lent, allowed for such unpredictable and rowdy behaviour, too. In a couple of infamous sixteenth-century instances, it provided a stage for the acting out of barbaric cruelties as part of a family vendetta in Friuli, Italy, and the violent outcome of political and socio-economic tensions within the small town of Romans in southern France. Ritual practices continued to be employed throughout the early modern period for the sometimes violent expression of grievances. One infamous episode was the so-called ‘Great Cat Massacre’ perpetrated by workers in eighteenth-century Paris and brought so vividly to life by Robert Darnton.⁹ Here, ritual combined with socio-economic resentment and feline symbolism in an explosive mix, with the resulting slaughter of cats reflective of social and cultural tensions within the master’s household and workshop. This event was also a simple extension of the ritualized torture and killing of animals which was a common feature of early modern popular festivals and street entertainment throughout Europe.

⁸ Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 104.

⁹ Robert Darnton, ‘Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin’ in his, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (London, 1984), pp. 79-104.

With the advent of the Reformation, confessional divisions generated new points of difference which cut across many existing areas of communal solidarity which were not previously at issue. Religious tensions could combine with and exacerbate, as well as run counter to and forge anew, existing hostilities, as they did at Romans. They were, at once, both galvanizing and destructive. Another striking form of interpersonal violence, which escalated during the Reformation, involved attacks on those already dead. The disruption of burials and the disinterment and desecration of bodies took place in different locations from Ireland to Hungary. In England, in one instance, the decapitated head of an executed priest was used as a football; in France, corpses were left to the attentions of scavenging dogs and birds. Cemeteries were also targeted, graves vandalized, and monuments pulled down. The disrespect and hostility towards the members of other faiths displayed by such violent activities, denying them the right to a proper Christian burial, was symbolic and unsettling and designed to intimidate. Other acts of confessional violence included attacks, both physical and verbal, on preachers during sermons and priests during processions; random or more premeditated assaults on those associated with the other faith; and threats of violence against those who supported them, even members of one's own family. Furthermore, the burning down and demolition of churches and sites of devotional importance, book-burnings and the desecration of shrines and crosses, brought a material dimension to violent rejection of the opposing faith.

Iconoclasm

One of the most prominent and distinctive types of violence during the Reformation was acts of iconoclasm. This could take many different forms: the destruction and disposal of relics and images, the smearing of excrement on statues and altars, or the melting down of reliquaries and other ornaments. In these assaults, the iconoclasts were ideologically driven;

they were making a statement of rejection and purification of what they perceived to be Catholic idolatry. Such acts also had a political edge. Incidents could be individual or collective, clandestine or overtly public. A distinction needs to be made between those officially-sanctioned instances, most obviously during the English Reformation, the Dutch Revolt and in the Holy Roman Empire, and more popular acts aimed at destroying the blasphemous aspects of Catholic worship, although overlap between the two was not uncommon. Nevertheless, it is important to note the differences between social groups, people and authorities, ministers and congregations, over the uses of iconoclasm. The wilful destruction of images went right back to the beginnings of the Reformation in 1520s, and ‘iconoclasm was an inevitable outcome of Reformed ideology’ which encouraged the subversion of the existing order.¹⁰ Protestant ministers and officials struggled to curb and control popular enthusiasm and volatility stirred up by dramatic preaching. Ministers and lay elders feared reprisals and loss of elite support. While, on the one hand, attacks on ‘false’ objects of Catholic devotion were in keeping with doctrine, municipal officials were uncomfortable with disorderly acts carried out by an unregulated populace, causing tension with congregations, as was the case in Bern in 1528. Indeed, such acts could appear ‘revolutionary’ as they seemed to actively threaten established authority, as for instance in the Netherlands and France, particularly in 1560s. The contemporary perception of iconoclasm, according to preference, as due to godly zeal or furious rage, however, sets up a ‘false dichotomy’.¹¹ Such actions could be spontaneous, but were certainly deliberate. They were designed to shock as much as to destroy.

This impact is still visible today in a striking fifteenth-century sculpture in the cathedral at Utrecht, ‘the most symbolic of all church buildings in the (Dutch) Republic’, rather euphemistically labelled as having been ‘damaged during the Reformation’ as if it had

¹⁰ Carlos M.N. Eire, *War against the Idols: the Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 279.

¹¹ Walsham, *Charitable Hatred*, pp. 106-7.

been done by accident.¹² The deliberate chiselling off of the faces of the saints, while leaving the rest of the artwork intact, still bears witness to its artistic beauty and, thus, seems more emotive and shocking than its complete destruction, as was surely the case for contemporaries at the time. Confronted by such violence against an object probably paid for by communal donations and certainly the object of communal devotions, it must have appeared to be an attack on the community, if not by the community, as well as reinforcing the impotence of these sacred objects and the triumph of Protestantism in the starkest way. In recent times, compared with the ferocious bloodshed of the wars which forms their backdrop, mourning for the destruction of the Buddha statues of Bamiyan, museum artefacts in Iraq or the ancient site of Palmyra in Syria, might seem to some trivial or disrespectful. Yet it can also be argued that the lamenting of their passing is valid, as a natural reaction to cultural vandalism which represents a visceral attack on a rival interpretation of history as well as shared communal values.¹³ The symbolic significance of early modern iconoclasm operated in this way, too, as its perpetrators and observers were keenly aware.

The most shocking and intense wave of iconoclasm took place in the Netherlands in 1566, as the provinces sought to establish independence from the Spanish Catholic authorities and to set up a Calvinist Republic. In the space of just two weeks, in the face of very little opposition, churches were sacked and images not just destroyed, but tortured and mutilated. The movement spread quickly through the major towns and into the countryside. While neither condemning nor condoning it, Calvinist ministers took advantage of the momentum it provided. The purges of the Reformation and the radical tendencies in the Civil War also resulted in the systematic official destruction of statues and shrines, rood screens and devotional paintings in England. Revolutionary France would witness similar acts of

¹² The quotation is from Benjamin J. Kaplan, “‘In Equality and Enjoying the Same Favor’: Biconfessionalism in the Low Countries ’, in Thomas Max Safley (ed.), *A Companion to Multiconfessionalism in the Early Modern World* (Leiden and Boston, 2011), p. 117; the reflections on the significance and impact of the damage done are my own.

¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2015/aug/24/razing-palmyra-mass-murder-isis>

destruction aimed at royal and ecclesiastical targets. In a culture where the execution of offenders in effigy, by hanging or burning, was normalized, and judicial procedures were heavily ritualized, it is unsurprising that images and objects were subject to symbolic assault of this sort. In addition, iconoclasm could act as both a substitute for and a prelude to more extreme acts of violence.

Iconoclasm was an act designed to be provocative and to cause scandal, but also to instruct and demonstrate the 'true' religious path. Its specific goal, however, was 'to disprove the (established) Church's spiritual authority'.¹⁴ Mostly it was conducted by Protestants against Catholic devotions, whereas Puritan iconoclasm in England in 1640s reflected an ideological struggle for supremacy within Protestantism itself. Clashes and disputes between members of different groups within the same faith were not confined to such issues. The retribution for iconoclastic acts could be violent, too, with punishments for perpetrators including execution, as the righting of injustice and the re-establishment of religious supremacy and legitimacy was sought by Catholic authorities where they had the upper hand. Similarly, officials took to removing and destroying inflammatory symbols of division, including documents and monuments. Most notoriously, the Cross of Gastines in Paris, which marked the spot where a Huguenot house had been razed to the ground, was moved to another site in 1571, despite the provocation and violent response which this action in turn generated. Such one-off incidents might peter out or, as in this case, contribute to an 'explosive emotional economy' which resulted in more wide-scale and brutal violence.¹⁵ Once again, the Reformation provided the conditions in which inter-communal disputes could flare up and lead to greater conflagration.

Massacre and Atrocity

¹⁴ Phyllis Mack Crew, *Calvinist Preaching and Iconoclasm in the Netherlands, 1544-1569* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 26.

¹⁵ Zemon Davis, 'Writing the "Rites of Violence"', p. 17.

Just as iconoclasm was a way for Protestants of purifying sacred space so, too, for Catholics, the polluting element of heresy could be excised by the shedding of Protestant blood. The culmination of this pattern of inter-communal violence across France was the archetypal religious atrocity, the killing of thousands of Protestants by Catholics in August and September 1572, known as the St Bartholomew's Day massacres. It can be safely asserted that the extent of the brutality of the French religious wars had no match on the European continent, but that should not allow us to overlook comparable outbreaks elsewhere, notably in the so-called Spanish Fury in Antwerp, and other military atrocities in the Netherlands in 1570s and 80s, or the treatment of Protestant settlers in Ireland in 1640s. The difference here, perhaps, is that most of the violence in the Netherlands was perpetrated by foreigners rather than fellow citizens and neighbours, that peculiarly nasty aspect of civil wars in any period. Since the sixteenth century, English troops had been responsible for major atrocities against the Irish, forming the bedrock of resentment for the devastating violence of the seventeenth century.

The militia of Paris has been identified as largely responsible for the massacre of 1572, and this official participation is found to be the case in other French cities, too. Although still targeted at neighbours and fellow Frenchmen, such large scale violence seems, therefore, to have necessitated an element of military or official collusion. Equally, the graphic descriptions of the sort of barbaric violence meted out by the Spanish soldiers in 1576, or in Ireland in 1641, or indeed in the Empire during the Thirty Years' War, are reminiscent of that in France. These included, for example, instances of cannibalism, of gratuitous mutilation and torture, and the unnatural killing of innocents in cold blood, especially children and pregnant women. Of course, here we are dealing with the biased reporting produced by the ideologically-driven rhetoric of a confessional conflict, designed to demonize the other side. Historians need to be sensitive to this when categorizing and

analysing this sort of violence. People certainly died in their thousands, and we have corroborative testimony from more moderate Catholic observers for the generic rituals of dragging bodies through the streets and the deliberate and calculated drowning of victims in rivers. Although individual stories are harder to verify, their symbolism is as important as their veracity for our understanding of contemporary attitudes to violence.

This pattern of brutality, however, was not experienced to the same extent in all communities. When it came to inter-communal confessional violence, Judith Pollmann argues, Dutch Catholics were more restrained than their French counterparts because of general opposition to the Spanish-imposed stringent heresy laws and a less vitriolic tendency among the clergy who, in France, actively stirred up a violent response.¹⁶ When considering the contrast between Catholic violence during the French religious wars and the Dutch Revolt, it is worth reflecting further on the role of Spanish involvement. In the northern Netherlands, the brutality of Spanish troops did much to undermine the Catholic cause and allowed Protestants to present their movement as a resistance to foreign tyranny. In France, Catholic preachers were able to stir up the antipathy of crowds toward the Protestant minority, whereas its alliance with Spain was one of the contributory factors discrediting the Catholic League in 1590s. A powerful sense of confronting the ‘other’, whether in the form of foreigners or confessional opponents and the threat they posed to the wider community, undoubtedly played a key role in instigating and regulating large-scale violence.

As the examples of France and the Netherlands demonstrate, much of the ‘frequently violent aftermath’ of the Reformation was concentrated in the sixteenth century, with fainter echoes in many countries, with some notable exceptions, into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁷ According to David Luebke, in the Holy Roman Empire, the practice of *simultaneum* (the sharing of sites of worship) and other communal arrangements were able

¹⁶ Pollmann, ‘Countering the Reformation’, 83-120.

¹⁷ The phrase comes from Jennifer Spinks and Charles Zika (eds), *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400-1700* (London, 2016), p. 3.

‘to smother religious violence’, with only limited outbursts after 1648.¹⁸ Keith Luria points to continuing confrontations in seventeenth-century France, with violence in some regions ‘a constant factor ... (which) easily surfaced in particularly difficult times’, but argues that there was also widespread accommodation of the other faith.¹⁹ Nevertheless, even in the relatively peaceful Dutch Republic, there were incidents of sporadic violence between the confessions in the lands of Overmaas, for example, well into the eighteenth century. The violent consequences of civil war were also powerfully felt in mid seventeenth-century England and Ireland. One of the bloodiest conflicts of the seventeenth century, of course, was the Thirty Years’ War, which resulted in the death, destruction and displacement of many people in the Holy Roman Empire and had ramifications far beyond it. The role of religion as a driving force in these wars has, however, been disputed.

Peter Wilson, in particular, has downplayed the confessional nature of the Thirty Years’ War and argues that explicit propaganda exaggerated the stories of brutality and cruelty carried out principally by foreign soldiers which was manipulated to justify violent retaliation. Furthermore, the infamous destruction or ‘rape’ of Magdeburg in 1631, which resulted in the death of four fifths of the city’s population, was a horrific but exceptional event given undue prominence by historians. So, too, the massacre or ‘bloodbath’ of 600 Protestants in Valtellina in 1620, was blamed on Catholic clergy. Despite incidents of iconoclasm and confessionally-motivated mob violence, Wilson asserts, ‘it remains questionable how far violence was directly motivated by religion’, especially that exacted by the military against civilians, often involving torture.²⁰ In this way, he downplays the role of religion in the War in contrast to other conflicts, but, again, we are dealing here with the

¹⁸ David M. Luebke, ‘A Multiconfessional Empire’, in Max Safley (ed.), *A Companion to Multiconfessionalism*, pp. 150-2.

¹⁹ Especially in 1620s and the lead up to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685: Keith Luria, ‘France: an Overview’, in Max Safley (ed.), *A Companion to Multiconfessionalism*, pp. 222, 229-30.

²⁰ Peter H. Wilson, ‘Dynasty, Constitution, and Confession: The Role of Religion in the Thirty Years War’, *The International History Review*, 30 (2008), 491-2, 502.

difference between troop and popular violence. For the soldiery, other considerations were more significant, including the opportunity for plunder and humiliation of foes, and Wilson suggests that a breakdown of communication with the local population was the cause of much of the brutality. The violence was not all one way, however; resistance and reprisal by the populace was also characteristic of the conflict, introducing a communal element. It is argued that there is little evidence for violent death during the War, and that most of the civilian population succumbed to disease, but this neglects the strong relationship between the spread of epidemics and the weakening of the population as a result of civil war. France, for instance, also witnessed a significant demographic decline during its religious wars. Wilson admits that increased confessional animosity contributed to the outbreak of the War stating that, during the first decades of the seventeenth century, the polarization of Protestants and Catholics in the Empire into opposing armed parties increased tension and ‘led directly to violence’.²¹ The interplay of religion and violence in these and other similar circumstances, and the role of the former as a contributory factor to the latter, therefore, continues to be a contested issue dependent on the weight given to confessional difference.

The atrocities perpetrated in Ireland in 1640s, ‘where ethnic and confessional hatred converged with truly ghastly results’, would seem to provide an uncontested conclusion to this conundrum.²² They have only recently drawn serious scholarly attention, however, so politicized do many of their aspects remain. Here the worst acts of violence were directed by Irish Catholics against the Protestant settlers in Ulster, most especially with the deliberate drowning of settlers at Portadown and the burning of refugees in (the aptly named) Kilmore. This in turn was, of course, a response to a bloody campaign of conquest and colonization conducted by English troops. In seventeenth-century Ireland, we see many of the patterns of violence and its portrayal experienced in communities across Europe, but certainly producing

²¹ Wilson, ‘Dynasty, Constitution, and Confession’, 477.

²² Walsham, *Charitable Hatred*, p. 114.

a 'level of violence ... more intense and vicious than elsewhere in the Tudor and Stuart kingdoms'.²³ There was the symbolic use of ritual beheadings, accusations of barbarity including (once again) cannibalism on both sides, and the dehumanization of victims. The violence, which escalated over time, was legitimized with reference to divine sanction and justified as a response to provocation. As in the Empire and the Netherlands, blaming foreigners for the worst acts was commonplace. Thus, violence was used to intimidate and to seek revenge for previous atrocities. Indeed, it is evident that the cold-blooded killing of Irish civilians by English soldiers during the sixteenth-century campaigns far outweighed in bloodshed the impact of the oft-cited endemic clan violence of the native lords. Ritual brutality was evident here, too. At Maynooth Castle, in 1535, the Irish 'rebels' were deliberately and symbolically decapitated on the feast of the Annunciation, so as to send out a stark message of royal retribution. Confessional divisions would only become significant in later years, merging into other hatreds with catastrophic results for inter-communal relations.

While Wilson points to a pervasive climate of uncertainty in the Empire which he describes as violating what was familiar, Alex Walsham, by contrast, sees episodic violence in England as occasional 'ruptures of normal neighbourly relations'. Nevertheless, she acknowledges that 'episodes of verbal and physical aggression' between faith groups increased at times of political crisis, and at these times 'waves of religious persecution cut vertically rather than horizontally across communities and neighbourhoods'.²⁴ However, civil conflict did see a breakdown in social relations in some areas, accompanied by incidents of iconoclasm and popular violence, including anti-Catholic riots which targeted wealthy Catholic lords in particular. Furthermore, insolent and provocative behaviour and self-segregation by minority groups increased hostility and, therefore, the likelihood of violence against them. Challenging the positive depiction of early modern England as relatively

²³ Tait, Edwards and Lenihan, 'Early Modern Ireland', p. 23.

²⁴ Walsham, *Charitable Hatred*, pp. 136, 140, 148.

restrained in its confessional relations, Ethan Shagan has identified the ‘subtle violence’ of the English crown in controlling and coercing the populace through a policy which advocated moderation and restraint.²⁵ An emphasis on obedience and conformity was aggressively and violently pursued in the interests of the monarchical state and the official Church, and even the language of liberty during the English Revolution, he argues, was exclusive and intolerant. Violence, or at least the use of force, could therefore be a factor in both exacerbating and calming inter-communal tensions. Pacification of civil unrest involved constraint and the exercise of control by the authorities.

Conclusion

If we accept that ‘honour and status are implicit in violence’, in the case of violent inter-communal clashes during the Reformation, it was often the group or confession’s honour that was perceived to be at stake.²⁶ More than that, the forceful removal or defeat of confessional opponents, or the destruction of objects sacred to them, demonstrated divine approval for the victor or iconoclast’s faith or version of religious truth. It demonstrated where sacred power lay. Without its religious trappings, this violence looks very much like the long-established rituals of lay vendetta or the posturing of political factions. Yet, without the ideology underlying these actions, such violence might not have taken place at all or certainly not in this form or to this extent. The symbolism and targets were significant to both perpetrator and victim. Violence was a performance and an embodiment of seemingly irreconcilable differences within communities, but it was only one indicator of the state of confessional relations. To some degree, inter-communal tensions resulting from the Reformation were successfully accommodated, and there was a decline in their incidence as the early modern period progressed. Such a decline was partly due to the ongoing establishment and

²⁵ Ethan Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation: Violence, Religion and the Politics of Restraint in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 29, 341.

²⁶ Blok, *Honour and Violence*, p. 9.

acceptance of coexistence, however uneasy, but also to a more effective suppression of the threat posed by minority groups. Eventually, issues other than religious ones, which had always been present, came to the fore, so that popular discourse became more focused on political and socio-economic grievances at a time of demographic pressure, shifting social relations and, ultimately, revolution. Religious minorities remained convenient scapegoats at times of crisis, but the perception of their presence as an existential danger had passed by 1800. Previously expelled groups, such as the Jews, were readmitted and the changing cultural and political climate better allowed for some expressions of dissent. While confessional tensions remained, the decline in inter-communal religious violence within Europe reflected this fundamental change.

The Reformation challenged the authority of the early modern state and encouraged its assertion of greater control over its population. The impact of dealing with inter-communal violence and the consequences of religious war forced rulers to legislate for both the public peace and for religious concord. The Treaty of Westphalia (1648) is traditionally seen as having brought the period of religious wars, or conflicts fought over religion, to an end. This is misleading in two ways; as we have seen, religious violence continued well after 1648, and secondly, there had already been a whole series of peace settlements by which rulers sought a resolution to the religious turmoil which had violently disrupted the lives of their subjects. Just as the Edict of Nantes of 1598 was only the most well-known of such attempts at peaceful coexistence in France, so Westphalia provided an international forum for the establishment of peace, the form of which, however, was shaped by earlier settlements, such as the Catholic/Lutheran agreement of the Peace of Augsburg (1555) in the Holy Roman Empire, and the Dutch Republic's ongoing struggle for independence from Spain. Yet, since inter-communal violence was often localized, so, too, by necessity was the establishment of the mechanisms by which that violence might be pacified. Thus, individual communities

addressed local issues in seeking solutions to the animosities previously displayed. Churches were shared, the use of bells restricted, procession and feast-day etiquette mutually agreed. In the Dutch Republic, the concealment of chapels within apparently ordinary townhouses allowed a blind eye to be turned and little offence caused. All faiths were encouraged to respect the rituals and sites for worship of the others and discouraged from disrupting their devotions in any way. This did not always work, of course, and there continued to be sporadic violence from time to time. Thus, communal tensions over religion lessened, but were far from eliminated.

The difficulty of reconciling opposing sides within a civil war context is particularly obvious. The terms of any proposed peace often prove controversial and divisive, making conflicts more bitter and long-lived. Stathis Kalyvas argues that the presence of, or potential for, violence during peacetime results from the same antagonisms which propagate war. Therefore, unless they can be resolved or forgotten, a lasting and meaningful peace cannot be achieved, and violent clashes will continue.²⁷ Even when a working coexistence has been established, therefore, confessional differences always have the potential to re-emerge when tensions are running high. Nevertheless, Wayne Te Brake argues that a 'more-or-less durable religious peace' had been established in Europe by the second half of the seventeenth century, but also that religious diversity was deliberately hidden from view by these settlements.²⁸ He sees them as messy, complex and fragile compromises, involving improvisation and offering only imperfect solutions. At least, however, confessional violence within communities gradually became a less frequent occurrence as a result, even if official acts of repression by force were still a feature of early modern politics. The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685 was preceded and accompanied by violence as troops were billeted on Huguenot households whose members were given little choice but to convert

²⁷ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 22.

²⁸ Wayne P. Te Brake, *Religious War and Religious Peace in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 17-18.

or leave the French kingdom. The Waldensians of Savoy experienced even more severe treatment. The brutal repression of the revolt of the Protestant Camisards of southern France in 1706 was a further demonstration of official intolerance of resistance and non-conformity. The suppression of the Jansenists, too, and the razing of their headquarters at the convent of Port-Royal in 1711, would not be the last such episode of violent coercion of a religious minority. Rulers readily embraced the opportunity presented by the need to regulate peace to keep their minority groups in check and to safeguard their own authority. They promoted official suppression of disruptive or subversive activities while condemning inter-communal violence which was more unpredictable and, therefore, disorderly, and increasingly had the means to enforce their will in this regard. In this way, by 1800, political violence had displaced confessional violence within communities as the predominant form of repression and exclusion.