



The French Wars of Religion

Caroline Rogers

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The celebrations marking the Treaty of Câteau-Cambrésis in 1559 ended in tragedy when Henry II was mortally wounded by a lance piercing his eye whilst jousting. His unexpected death opened the floodgates to discontent which had been gathering over the years but had been kept in check by the strength of the monarchy under Francis I and Henry II. The problems under Henry had been similar to those faced by his father, namely the resolution of the old Habsburg—Valois conflict, inadequate revenue and the increase in the spread of Protestant ideas. The new King, Francis II, was only 15 years old and incapable of exerting the personal authority that was needed to defeat the opposition. That opposition was to plunge France into over 30 years of civil wars. Those wars are usually referred to as the 'French Wars of Religion' and certainly the growth of a militant Calvinism and the Catholic reaction to it made the nation much less stable. However, religion was by no means the only cause of war. The nation was to be torn apart by the faction fighting of the great aristocratic families and their clients. And the wars were not fought out just at a national level. As royal authority broke down local feuds had free play and foreign powers began to interfere in the internal affairs of France. The situation could only be saved by the Crown, the unifying force in France, but the problems of royal authority seemed too severe and the inadequacies of those who wore the crown in this period too marked. This study guide is suitable for university or senior high school students, or anyone interested in the subject. Topics covered include: The Republic of the Midi, the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre, The Catholic League, Francis II, Catherine de Medici, Henry IV, the Edict of Nantes, The Wars of Succession and more.

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