

# H-Net Reviews

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Mark Greengrass. *France in the Age of Henri IV: The Struggle for Stability*. New York and London: Longman, 1995. xiii + 308 pp. \$10.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-08721-7.

Reviewed by Henry Heller (University of Manitoba)  
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The period of the French religious wars is one of the most confused and perplexing episodes in European history. A seemingly endless series of riots, military campaigns and conspiracies ostensibly inspired by religious hostility rendered the French monarchy impotent and plunged the Kingdom into anarchy for more than a generation. The exhausted, quarreling parties finally rallied behind the Bourbon pretender, Henri of Navarre, for whom it turned out that Paris was indeed worth a Mass.

Until the 1960s the French religious wars largely defied rational analysis. But since then the researches of French, Canadian, British, and American scholars have gradually made the period more intelligible. The publication of this study by Mark Greengrass in 1984 marked a new stage in which the results of this recent scholarship found a convincing synthesis. Published as part of Longman's Studies in Modern History, the book is intended primarily for students, according to the introduction by John Morrill and David Cannadine. Though the volume undoubtedly will be useful to students, this is far too modest a description. *France in the Age of Henri IV* is in fact an impressive synthesis which is of real importance to active scholars and researchers in the field. The publication of a revised and updated new edition is therefore to be warmly welcomed.

For this new edition Greengrass has added a chapter which deals with Henri IV's conversion and accession to the throne. At the same time the text and bibliography have been brought up to date. As it now stands, the work has nine chapters which guide the reader through the highlights of the early civil wars, the Catholic League, the conversion of Henri and the proclamation of the Edict of Nantes, financial and economic recovery, the reconciliation of office holders, clergy and nobility with

the crown, and, finally, French diplomacy. Henri's conscious work of pacification through religious reconciliation, economic and financial reconstruction and recovery of the loyalty of the clerical, legal and landed elites remains the unifying theme at the heart of Greengrass's book.

Greengrass confirms the importance of religious conflict through his discussion of the background to urban violence, the dynamics of the Catholic League and the character of the compromises forced on the Bourbon king by Catholics and Huguenots. Especially useful is his detailed discussion of the settlement with the Huguenots which breaks quite new ground. Likewise noteworthy is his investigation of financial reform which amounts to a new synthesis of this critical question. Among the most valuable insights in this respect is the link made between Henri's conversion and recovery of the financial powers necessary to establish peace. Where pertinent to the discussion of finances and the religious settlement, the author introduces his obviously extensive knowledge of the printed and archival sources. Indeed, Greengrass's easy and impressive familiarity with the primary materials of the period only reinforces the reader's confidence in the author's command of the existing body of historical scholarship.

Scholarly debates regarding this period abound: the causes of the religious wars, the events behind the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, the so-called crisis of the aristocracy, the nature of the popular revolts of the 1590s, the objectives of Henri's foreign policy, and the genesis of royal absolutism. In many cases, if not all, Greengrass provides an up-to-date summary of the state of these controversies, not hesitating to bring to bear his own intelligent and independent opinions. A good example is the

way he questions Yves-Marie Berce's supposedly authoritative analysis of the so-called Croquants revolt. Berce, a student of Roland Mousnier, insists that these revolts in southwest France in the 1590s did not represent a challenge to the so-called society of orders. Although no champion of class analysis, Greengrass conscientiously marshals the research which is fatal to Berce's dogmatism.

Fundamental to Greengrass's treatment of this period is his belief in the essential importance of politics and the state to French history. Having himself a deep knowledge of the social and economic history of the period, Greengrass, nonetheless, implicitly rejects the economization of so much of *Annaliste* history. This may be the product of nothing more than so-called English common sense. But it may also reflect a healthy reaction to a view that has grossly underestimated the intimate relationship, for better or worse, between states and markets. Indeed, Greengrass's stress on the importance of elites is positively refreshing in the face of the *Annaliste* fetishizing of the inert masses.

Greengrass's emphasis is on the reconsolidation of France under Henri IV. A great deal of the text, however, is actually devoted to the religious wars. It is essentially the subject of the first three chapters, and many of the others begin with retrospective glances in their direction from different perspectives. Greengrass's account of these wars is in certain respects the least satisfactory element of this excellent work. He lays too much stress on urban religious violence while underplaying the degree to which the conflict was incited and prolonged by the nobility. Moreover, although he alludes to the crisis of

the aristocracy, that is, the collapse of the aristocracy's traditional internal cohesion and the fall of its real income, he too casually dismisses it. He stresses the religious motivation behind the violence, but does not take into account the financial insolvency of the state in setting off the wars. There is some sense of contradiction here because the author, while stressing the importance of the resolution of the problem of state finance in bringing the wars to an end, is reluctant to acknowledge the importance of this question in the wars' origins.

Greengrass's description of the economic consequences of the conflict is convincing. On the other hand, he does not even allude to the economic and psychological effects of growing social polarization on the attitudes of the middling sort of people. Relying mainly on trade figures, Greengrass dates the economic crisis in France to the time of the League (1585). Yet even on these terms he is forced to concede that Lyon, the economic capital of France, was already in serious difficulty in the 1570s. Despite passing references to more profound reasons, Greengrass leaves the impression that the wars were responsible for the economic crisis and that peace brought a return to prosperity. Such a view paradoxically coincides with that of contemporaries who, to cite Greengrass, were "... naively convinced that economic miseries and civil wars were intimately and inseparably associated and that both were signs of the imminent judgement of God" (p. 157).

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