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ARTICLE

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by Sibylle Röth

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SIBYLLE RÖTH

*I. Uncertainty Everywhere:
The Indistinct Image of the French League and England's State of
Insecurity*

In March 1584, the younger brother and heir apparent to the French king, François, Duke of Anjou and Alençon, fell severely ill. The English ambassador in Paris, Sir Edward Stafford, and his counterpart in the service of the Holy Roman Empire, Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq,¹ reported this to their respective governments with deep concern.² The changing state of Alençon's health and the uncertainty of the available information—according to some rumours, his death had already occurred but

This article is part of a chapter of my current book project *The French Holy League as Polyvalent Event: Self-Representation, External Perceptions, and Historiographical Receptions*. While some aspects had to be shortened to meet the requirements of an article, others still need deeper evaluation. I am grateful to the editors for the opportunity to publish my preliminary findings.

¹ See Charles Thornton Forster and Francis Henry Blackburne Daniell, 'Life of Busbecq', in Charles Thornton Forster and Francis Henry Blackburne Daniell (eds.), *The Life and Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq: Seigneur of Bousbecque, Knight, Imperial Ambassador*, 2 vols. (London, 1881), i. 1–72.

² Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, Letter XXXIII [to Rudolf II, 29 Mar. 1584], *ibid.* ii. 216–17; [Edward] Stafford to the Queen [Elizabeth], Paris, 9 March, 1583, in Joseph Stevenson et al. (eds.), *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign Series, of the Reign of Elizabeth*, 23 vols. in 26 (London, 1863–50), vol. xviii: *July 1583–July 1584* (London, 1914). In the following, I quote from the online version of this series at [<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/series/calendar-state-papers-foreign>], accessed 19 Aug. 2024, hereafter abbreviated as *CSPF*. Dates are given according to the original sources, which in most cases follow the Old Style as generally used by English correspondents. Whenever it is important for orientation, both Julian and Gregorian dates are provided.

was being concealed³ – posed major problems for accurate communication. Nevertheless, both were sure of one thing: Alençon's death would have serious consequences. Since the king was childless and hope for legitimate offspring was fading, the continuation of the dynasty was in doubt.⁴ The next heir to the throne, according to the Salic law of succession, was Henry de Bourbon, King of Navarre – a Protestant. In the heated atmosphere of the French confessional troubles – the seventh War of Religion had ended only four years before – this was a source of considerable tension. As Stafford explained when it temporarily appeared that the prince would recover: 'if anything had come to Monsieur [Alençon], there would as great trouble have come in France as ever was in any place, for you never saw such murmuring and privy assemblies, early and late, as were in this town.' Even at this early stage, he knew to report that Charles, Cardinal de Bourbon and Henry of Navarre's uncle, was positioned as a Catholic contender against him in the question of the succession.⁵

Eventually, the ambassadors confirmed Alençon's death on 1/10 June – this time with certainty. Both emphasized again that it would bring about significant changes.⁶ On the one hand, King Henry III was evidently willing to recognize Henry of Navarre as heir to the throne.⁷ However, like Stafford had done before, Busbecq also raised concerns about the consequences:

Some prognosticate that Alençon's death will give rise to great changes in France, and I think they are not far wrong, for the chief provinces and cities of the kingdom will not be disposed

³ Busbecq, Letter XXXVII [to Rudolf II, 6 June 1584], in Forster and Daniell (eds.), *Life and Letters*, ii. 219–20, at 219; cf. Stafford to [Francis] Walsingham, Paris, 16 Apr. 1584, and Stafford to [William Cecil, Lord] Burghley, Paris, 11 May 1584, in *CSPF*, vol. xviii.

⁴ Busbecq, Letter XXXVII [to Rudolf II, 6 June 1584], in Forster and Daniell (eds.), *Life and Letters*, ii. 219–20.

⁵ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 12 Mar. 1584, in *CSPF*, vol. xviii. In the edition, deciphered words are italicized, but I have quoted them in roman for the sake of readability.

⁶ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 1 June 1584, *ibid.*

⁷ Busbecq, Letter XXXVIII [to Rudolf II, 18 June, 1584], in Forster and Daniell (eds.), *Life and Letters*, ii. 221–3, at 222; Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 3 June 1584, in *CSPF*, vol. xviii.

to accept any Sovereign whose religion differs from theirs, neither will they lack leaders when they rise, for the governors of the provinces will come forward, and others to boot.⁸

The ambassadors were to be proven right: Alençon's death marked the beginning of the final phase of the French Wars of Religion in the sixteenth century. The imminent end of the Valois dynasty and the legitimate succession of Henry of Navarre were the starting point of the eighth and longest of these wars, which had plagued France since 1562. Throughout the ensuing conflicts, the alliances shifted; with the emergence of the (second) Holy League, a rebellious Catholic movement formed that opposed not only the Protestants but also their own legitimate and Catholic monarch, Henry III.⁹

The king, who had managed to position himself at the head of the first League in 1576 and thus contained the threat to his power, now found himself in a cycle of forced cooperation alternating with open confrontation, ultimately leading to the final rupture: in 1585, Henry III was compelled to side with the Catholic hardliners in the Treaty of Nemours, officially excluding Henry of Navarre from the succession and recognizing the League's candidate, the Cardinal de Bourbon, as his political heir.¹⁰ However, the *journée des barricades* in 1588, an uprising in Paris, forced the king to flee his capital.¹¹ Although the conflict was initially resolved and the king and the League reconciled, the situation fully escalated when Henry III, in a sort of pre-emptive strike, ordered the assassination of the League's leaders, the Duke and the Cardinal de Guise.¹² Subsequently, the theologians of the Sorbonne declared him excommunicated, releasing all subjects from their oaths of obedience. Numerous cities and provinces joined the rebellion, with the result that Henry III lost control over large parts of his realm.

⁸ Busbecq, Letter XXXVIII [to Rudolf II, 18 June 1584], in Forster and Daniell (eds.), *Life and Letters*, ii. 221–2.

⁹ For an overview, see Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 2005), 123–55; for a comprehensive study, see Jean-Marie Constant, *La Ligue* (Paris, 1996).

¹⁰ See Constant, *La Ligue*, 125–31. On the first League, see *ibid.* 70–7.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 149–55; Denis Richet, 'Les Barricades à Paris, le 12 mai 1588', *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 45/2 (1990), 383–95.

¹² See Constant, *La Ligue*, 201–12.

In response, the king allied himself with Henry of Navarre, which led to an open civil war between Catholic royalists and Protestants on one side and the radical Catholic League on the other.¹³ The war only ended when Henry of Navarre converted to Catholicism in 1593 and thus gradually won over the supporters of the League. These conflicts were accompanied by fervent propaganda, ranging from short polemical pamphlets¹⁴ to substantial contributions to political thought. In the process, Catholic writers not only matched the radicalism of the Protestant monarchomachs in legitimizing the right to resist, but even went so far as to justify regicide.¹⁵

The interpretation of the Catholic League has presented significant challenges to observers and researchers from the outset. Contemporaries primarily associated Protestantism with disobedience and rebellion, while Catholicism, as the established majority religion, was generally aligned with the ruling authorities and hence hardly connected with unrest. This interpretation persisted in research for a long time, but with reversed normative implications: adhering to a narrative of progress, Catholicism, even when engaging in Counter-Reformation reforms, was viewed at most as reform-conservative, while the Reformation was classified as a milestone towards modernity by promoting freedom, tolerance, and fundamental human rights.¹⁶ Against the background of this grand narrative, a lively debate over

¹³ Ibid. 213–312.

¹⁴ See e.g. Marco Penzi, 'Les pamphlets ligueurs et la polémique anti-ligueuse: Faux-textes et "vrais faux". Propagande et manipulation des récits', in Jacques Berchtold and Marie-Madeleine Fragonard (eds.), *La mémoire des Guerres de religion: La concurrence des genres historiques (XVI^e–XVIII^e siècles)*. Actes du colloque international de Paris (15–16 novembre 2002) (Geneva 2007), 133–51.

¹⁵ See John H. M. Salmon, 'Catholic Resistance Theory, Ultramontanism, and the Royalist Response, 1580–1620', in James Henderson Burns and Mark Goldie (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450–1700* (Cambridge, 1991), 219–53; Andrei Constantin Sălăvăstru, 'The Problem of Tyrannicide in the Monarchomach and Leaguer Political Discourse during the Reigns of Charles IX (1560–1574) and Henry III (1574–1589)', *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy*, 14/2 (2022), 638–64.

¹⁶ The details of this narrative vary with the specific context. In Germany, there is a strong focus on Luther's writings, whereas English 'Whig history' emphasizes the significance of the revolutions of the seventeenth century. The French monarchomachs play a key role in the history of political thought. See

how to accurately characterize the League arose in the second half of the twentieth century. While older scholarship had primarily focused on the leading actors — King Henry III, the Protestant pretender to the throne Henry of Navarre, and the leader of the ultra-Catholic faction Henri de Guise — researchers increasingly turned to the rebellious urban population. Using categories that might today seem anachronistic, the Parisian League was interpreted as the first modern and proto-totalitarian party;¹⁷ the conflicts were framed as class struggles;¹⁸ and parallels were sought with the French Revolution.¹⁹ Other interpretations depicted the League as traditionalist, drawing from medieval community ideals,²⁰ or viewed it as radical and reactionary in equal measure.²¹ The cultural turn in historiography then led to a new emphasis on religious motivations and characterized the actors primarily as zealots or holy warriors.²²

Recent scholarship has questioned the generalizability of these predominantly Paris-centric images of the League, seeking a more nuanced perspective through numerous regional studies.²³ This has led to greater emphasis on the ambiguity and internal diversity of the

John Witte Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism* (Cambridge, 2007).

¹⁷ Elie Bar-Navi, 'La Ligue Parisienne (1585–94): Ancêtre des partis totalitaires modernes?', *French Historical Studies*, 11/1 (1979), 29–57.

¹⁸ Henry Heller, *Iron and Blood: Civil Wars in Sixteenth-Century France* (Montreal, 1991).

¹⁹ Denis Richet, *De la Réforme à la Révolution: Études sur la France moderne* (Paris, 1991).

²⁰ Robert Descimon, 'La Ligue à Paris (1585–1594): Une révision', *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 37/1 (1982), 72–111.

²¹ Frederic J. Baumgartner, *Radical Reactionaries: The Political Thought of the French Catholic League* (Geneva, 1976).

²² Nathalie Zemon Davis, 'The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France', *Past & Present*, 59 (1973), 51–91; Denis Crouzet, *Les guerriers de Dieu: La violence au temps des troubles de religion, vers 1525–vers 1610*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1990).

²³ e.g. Olivia Carpi, *Une république imaginaire: Amiens pendant les troubles de religion, 1559–1597* (Paris, 2005); Stéphane Gal, *Grenoble au temps de la Ligue: Étude politique, sociale et religieuse d'une cité en crise (vers 1562–vers 1598)* (Grenoble, 2000); Mark W. Konner, *Local Politics in the French Wars of Religion: The Towns of Champagne, the Duc de Guise, and the Catholic League, 1560–1595* (Aldershot, 2006).

movement. It is stressed that not all League followers were committed ideologues; many were moderates and waverers.²⁴ Furthermore, there is increasing focus on international connections and entanglements.²⁵ However, this also makes it challenging to achieve a comprehensive interpretation of the League. As Jan-Friedrich Mißfelder noted in 2007, there now seem to be as many Leagues as there were cities.²⁶

Given this context, I do not intend to revisit the question of what the League was, but instead consider how it was perceived by contemporary observers. While the loss of definiteness poses no major problem for historians – identifying local differences and uncovering internal contradictions rather appear to enrich our understanding – it was often crucial for contemporaries to obtain a coherent picture of the events. For them, ambiguity meant uncertainty and complicated their assessments, and thus hindered their ability to respond appropriately. This could potentially lead to indecision and, at a time of extreme tensions both internationally and domestically, even to insecurity. Hence, gaining comprehensive and accurate information on political developments in France was often essential. This of course depended on the position of the observer: while the Holy Roman Emperor's concern was evidently limited,²⁷ and his envoy Busbecq

²⁴ Sylvie Daubresse and Bertrand Haan (eds.), *La Ligue et ses frontières: Engagements catholiques à distance du radicalisme à la fin des guerres de Religion* (Rennes, 2015); Sophie Nicholls, *Political Thought in the French Wars of Religion* (Cambridge, 2021).

²⁵ e.g. Fabrice Micallef, *Un désordre européen: La compétition internationale autour des 'affaires de Provence' (1580–1598)* (Paris, 2014); Hervé Le Goff, *La Ligue en Bretagne: Guerre civile et conflit international (1588–1598)* (Rennes, 2010); Serge Brunet, 'Philippe II et la Ligue parisienne (1588)', *Revue historique*, 656 (2010), 795–844.

²⁶ Jan-Friedrich Mißfelder, 'Forschungen zur Rolle der Städte während der Französischen Religionskriege', *sehpunkte*, 7/11 (2007), at [https://www.sehpunkte.de/2007/11/11134.html], accessed 19 Aug. 2024.

²⁷ Besides his personal disposition, Emperor Rudolph II's reluctant policy towards France was caused by his concerns for stability in the empire and by the unresolved relationship with the Spanish line of the Habsburgs. See Andrey Y. Prokopiev, 'Der deutsche Adel und die französischen Religionskriege', *PROSLOGION: Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Social History and Culture*, 1/13 (2016), 270–92, at 274. As late as 1591, the Duke of Mayenne, the leading figure of the League since the death of Henri de Guise in 1588, opened

repeatedly focused on the consequences for his country of origin, the Netherlands,²⁸ the English government found it expedient to understand events in France. Therefore, this article will concentrate on the English perspective.

Generally speaking, the English government aimed to maintain good relations with France, which had to be carefully balanced with its commitment to international Protestantism. Elizabeth I initially sent troops to support the Protestant rebels in the first War of Religion; however, after they were shamefully defeated, she withdrew, choosing instead to provide financial and diplomatic support for the Protestant cause.²⁹ In the 1570s in particular, she pursued closer ties with the French court, since tensions with Spain were rising and England was feeling increasingly isolated internationally. Although marriage negotiations between the queen and King Charles IX's younger brother – the later Henry III – did not succeed, they led to the Treaty of Blois in April 1572,³⁰ solidifying an alliance between the two traditionally adversarial states.³¹ Elizabeth did not rescind this treaty despite the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre a few months later, which otherwise severely strained English–French

a letter to the emperor by explaining the situation in France and the intentions of the League, and by introducing himself in broad terms. Evidently, there had been no previous exchange for him to build on. See No. CCCCXLII [Charles de Mayenne à Empereur Rodolphe II, 2 June 1591], in Charles Loriquet and Édouard Henry (eds.), *Correspondance du duc de Mayenne, publiée sur le manuscrit de la Bibliothèque de Reims*, 2 vols. (Reims, 1860–4), ii. 287–90.

²⁸ These were, in fact, far-reaching: as most of the Northern Netherlands had submitted to Alençon's protectorship, his death posed the question of whether Henry III would succeed him. Busbecq described the ensuing negotiations in detail. However, even beyond that, the situation of the Netherlands is very present in his letters.

²⁹ David J. B. Trim, 'Seeking a Protestant Alliance and Liberty of Conscience on the Continent, 1558–1585', in Susan Doran and Glenn Richardson (eds.), *Tudor England and Its Neighbours* (Basingstoke, 2005), 139–77, at 152. In consequence, Elizabeth only deployed troops again after the assassination of Henry III, when Henry of Navarre was proclaimed French king.

³⁰ Susan Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I* (London, 1996), 99–129.

³¹ Pauline Croft, "'The State of the World is Marvellously Changed': England, Spain, and Europe, 1558–1604", in Doran and Richardson (eds.), *Tudor England*, 178–202.

relations.³² Even the idea of a marriage with one of the king's other brothers was pursued – the very François Alençon whose death in 1584 then triggered the succession crisis.³³ Although this – evidently more serious – endeavour also failed in the early 1580s, Elizabeth continued to support Alençon's involvement in the Netherlands as protector.³⁴ His death was therefore indeed a loss for her, albeit perhaps in political more than emotional terms.

However, there were further reasons for tension between the two states. Not only did France become a gathering point for English exiles in the 1580s,³⁵ but also Mary Stuart – whose very existence as a potential Catholic alternative to Elizabeth's rule became a constant threat during this time – had many allies and supporters there as former French queen and close relative of the House of Guise.³⁶ Additionally, the English College in Reims, likewise sponsored by the Guises, had served as a base for Catholic missions to England since 1578.³⁷ So the various Catholic conspiracies to replace Elizabeth with Mary Stuart could often be traced back to a network of support, if not active planning and direct involvement, from France.³⁸ Thus maintaining good

³² Nate Probasco, 'Queen Elizabeth's Reaction to the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre', in Charles Beem (ed.), *The Foreign Relations of Elizabeth I* (New York, 2011), 77–100; Christopher Archibald, 'Remembering the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Elizabethan England', *Studies in Philology*, 118/2 (2021), 242–83.

³³ Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony*, 130–94. On the different explanations for why these marriage negotiations failed, see Nathalie Mears, 'Love-Making and Diplomacy: Elizabeth I and the Anjou Marriage Negotiations, c.1578–1582', *History*, 86/284 (2001), 442–66.

³⁴ Trim, 'Seeking a Protestant Alliance', 161.

³⁵ Due to the hostilities in the Netherlands, the centre of English Catholic exile had moved to France; see John Bossy, 'Rome and the Elizabethan Catholics: A Question of Geography', *Historical Journal*, 7/1 (1964), 135–42. On the English exile in Paris in particular, see Katy Gibbons, *English Catholic Exiles in Late Sixteenth-Century Paris* (Woodbridge, 2011).

³⁶ Mark Greengrass, 'Mary Queen Dowager of France', *The Innes Review*, 38 (1987), 171–94; Alexander S. Wilkinson, *Mary Queen of Scots and French Public Opinion, 1542–1600* (Basingstoke, 2004).

³⁷ John H. M. Salmon, *The French Religious Wars in English Political Thought* (Oxford, 1959), 34.

³⁸ On the diverse conspiracies and plots aiming to depose Elizabeth and enthrone Mary, see Carole Levin, *The Reign of Elizabeth I* (Basingstoke, 2002), 80–103. On the discussion of how far those plots were manufactured by

relations with France required some effort and sometimes risky decisions on the part of the English government. That Protestant England and Catholic France kept resident ambassadors in each other's countries during this period of religious polarization was by no means a matter of course: in 1568, England had recalled its ambassador from Spain; in 1584, it expelled the Spanish ambassador Bernardino de Mendoza for his involvement in the Throckmorton Plot, and also declined to accept a successor.³⁹ In contrast, the French ambassador, Michel de Castelnau, Seigneur de la Mauvissière, who was also evidently involved in the plot, was allowed to remain⁴⁰ – even though he used his position to continue supporting Mary Stuart. The same applied to his successor, Guillaume de L'Aubespine, Baron of Châteauneuf, and his circle, who were similarly accused of further conspiring against Elizabeth.⁴¹

Hence, at a time when the English government was becoming increasingly obsessed with the numerous dangers it faced at home and abroad, developments in France were not only important as part of European power politics, but also perceived as a direct threat.⁴² Accordingly, Elizabeth and her council – particularly Lord Treasurer William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and the Secretary of State Francis Walsingham – endeavoured to stay informed through various correspondents extending well beyond official diplomats.⁴³ It was not

Elizabeth's government itself, see Patrick H. Martin, *Elizabethan Espionage: Plotters and Spies in the Struggle Between Catholicism and the Crown* (Jefferson, NC, 2016).

³⁹ Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (New York, 1988; 1st pub. 1955), 174–6.

⁴⁰ John Bossy, *Under the Molehill: An Elizabethan Spy Story* (New Haven, 2001), 152–4.

⁴¹ Robert Hutchinson, *Elizabeth's Spymaster: Francis Walsingham and the Secret War That Saved England* (London, 2007), 116–45 and 169–202. However, the English government's role in orchestrating these conspiracies through the use of agents provocateurs must be taken into account.

⁴² Stephen Alford, *The Watchers: A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth I* (London, 2012), 1–24; Paul E. J. Hammer, 'The Catholic Threat and the Military Response', in Susan Doran and Norman Jones (eds.), *The Elizabethan World*, 2nd edn. (London, 2014), 629–45; Levin, *Reign of Elizabeth I*, 57–103.

⁴³ Tracey A. Sowerby, 'Elizabethan Diplomatic Networks and the Spread of News', in Joad Raymond and Noah Moxham (eds.), *News Networks in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden, 2016), 305–27.

only Walsingham, known as Elizabeth's 'spymaster', who maintained a broad network ranging from agents and spies to fixed and occasional informants like merchants, travellers, and personal contacts,⁴⁴ Burghley, too, cultivated relations with various official and private correspondents abroad, whom he carefully instructed about the kind of information he needed⁴⁵ – not least in order to keep up with Walsingham in their competition for influence.⁴⁶ Information became the crucial currency for security, as well as for private ambition within the administration.⁴⁷

Of course, the English ambassador Edward Stafford himself played a central role in this information network. Situated in the Paris embassy, he was not only at the heart of events but also at the centre of the continental postal system.⁴⁸ He gathered news from diverse places in Europe, communicated with the French government (including the king and queen mother), maintained contact with French nobles from the different factions, exchanged information with other ambassadors in Paris (including the Spaniard Mendoza), and stayed in touch with English travellers and emigrants (including Catholic exiles).⁴⁹ Many of these contacts were facilitated by the fact that Stafford was by no means a Protestant hardliner; due to his family background, he was even assumed to be sympathetic to

⁴⁴ On Walsingham's intelligence network, see Hutchinson, *Elizabeth's Spymaster*. For the argument that it was nevertheless no institutionalized 'secret service', see Stephen Alford, 'Some Elizabethan Spies in the Office of Sir Francis Walsingham', in Robyn Adams and Rosanna Cox (eds.), *Diplomacy and Early Modern Culture* (Basingstoke, 2011), 46–62, at 48.

⁴⁵ Nicholas Popper, 'An Information State for Elizabethan England', *Journal of Modern History*, 90 (2018), 503–35, at 510–11.

⁴⁶ On Burghley, see Susan Doran, *Elizabeth I and Her Circle* (Oxford, 2015), 219–46; on his information network, see Popper, 'Information State'; on the conflicts between Walsingham and Burghley, see Hsuan-Ying Tu, 'The Pursuit of God's Glory: Francis Walsingham's Espionage in Elizabethan Politics, 1568–1588' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of York, 2012), at [<https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/5680>], accessed 19 Aug. 2024.

⁴⁷ Popper, 'Information State'.

⁴⁸ Sowerby, 'Elizabethan Diplomatic Networks', 316.

⁴⁹ Besides the question of his loyalty, there is little scholarship on Stafford. An insight into his complex web of contacts can be derived from John Bossy, *Giordano Bruno and the Embassy Affair* (New Haven, 1991).

Catholicism.⁵⁰ This, but not only this, also made him suspect. Belonging to Burghley's circle and watched distrustfully by Walsingham, Stafford was a notorious gambler who often faced financial shortages. Evidently, he was added to the payroll of both Philip II of Spain and the Duke of Guise by 1587 at the latest. However, it remains contested whether he tailored the information he transmitted to them in order to make it of little use.⁵¹ This question cannot be resolved here, but it highlights the fact that information gathering was not only challenging because of deficient access to news and complications in transmission—such as poor roads and long postal routes, lost letters due to unreliable messengers, or the perils of a country in civil war⁵²—but also involved the deliberate spread of false or misleading information and severe distrust.

In this article I delve into the English struggles to comprehend and interpret the French situation appropriately. I concentrate on the early years of the League—from its emergence in response to Alençon's death in 1584 to the *journée des barricades* in 1588. I analyse reports from France to the English government and the government's reactions, which are taken from English state papers. The main sources are the *Calendars of the State Papers, Foreign Series*, the Cecil Papers held at Hatfield House, and further published letters written or received by the main figures.⁵³ The aim is to illustrate how actors navigated and responded to the complex web of uncertainties they faced, in which several dimensions of incertitude overlapped: first, they were confronted with factual unknowns, contradictory news, and simply unproven rumours; second, they had to deal with doubts over how to interpret the information gathered; and

⁵⁰ Tu, 'The Pursuit of God's Glory', 107; Conyers Read, 'The Fame of Sir Edward Stafford', *American Historical Review*, 20/2 (1915), 292–313, at 293.

⁵¹ Read, 'The Fame'; Mitchell Leimon and Geoffrey Parker, 'Treason and Plot in Elizabethan Diplomacy: The "Fame of Sir Edward Stafford" Reconsidered', *English Historical Review*, 111/444 (1996), 1134–58.

⁵² E. John B. Allen, *Post and Courier Services in the Diplomacy of Early Modern Europe* (The Hague, 1972).

⁵³ On the problem that the English state papers are not a coherent set, but scattered across different locations, see Angela Andreani, 'Manuscripts, Secretaries, and Scribes: The Production of Diplomatic Letters at Court', in Carlo M. Bajetta, Guillaume Coatalen, and Jonathan Gibson (eds.), *Elizabeth I's Foreign Correspondence: Letters, Rhetoric, and Politics* (New York, 2014), 3–23, at 4.

third, they had to act under conditions of moral distrust towards both the actors they were observing and their communication partners.

This tense situation makes the relation between not knowing, uncertainty, and insecurity obvious. Fabrice Micallef has described this connection especially in times of political crisis, when new political actors with unknown political aims emerge:

[T]he experience of crisis is an experience of ignorance, of misunderstanding, and of misinterpretation. That risk of misinterpretation implies a political risk, especially when the observers concerned have political interests at stake and have to make choices appropriate to the situation at hand. In that case, overcoming non-knowledge becomes imperative.⁵⁴

But gathering information is not the only challenge in such a situation; the even more pressing question is how to interpret it.⁵⁵ Here, Cornel Zwierlein's thesis in regard to conspiracy theories seems to be transferable to political observations in general: in the absence of sufficient information, the given facts have to be supplemented by speculations that are unproven, but possible, in order to 'bridge the gaps of knowledge and understanding'.⁵⁶

The necessity of adding interpretation is also highlighted as a crucial factor in the cognitive and constructivist approaches in current international relations theory, where 'uncertainty' has become a key concept.⁵⁷ Regardless of whether the observer is facing an abundance of

⁵⁴ Fabrice Micallef, 'International Crises as Experience of Non-Knowledge: European Powers and the "Affairs of Provence" (1589-1598)', in Cornel Zwierlein (ed.), *The Dark Side of Knowledge: Histories of Ignorance, 1400 to 1800* (Leiden, 2016), 296-313, at 296.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 300-1.

⁵⁶ Cornel Zwierlein, 'Security Politics and Conspiracy Theories in the Emerging European State System (15th/16th c.)', *Historical Social Research*, 38/1 (2013), 65-95, at 72. On the similarities between conspiracy theory and political analysis in general, see *ibid.* 66: 'Both use the information of "true" present and/or past facts such as deeds and movements of political actors . . . draw connections between them, interpret coincidences as causalities and give a sense to the whole.'

⁵⁷ See Oliver Kessler and Christopher Daase, 'From Insecurity to Uncertainty: Risk and the Paradox of Security Politics', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*,

information or lacks any trustworthy information at all, he or she must ultimately take a leap into speculation in order not to end in paralysis.⁵⁸ This is because in a situation of fundamental complexity, where every new piece of information only heightens confusion, the only stable basis for decision-making is to be found in normative convictions, traditional patterns of interpretation, or established stereotypes.⁵⁹ While this enables action and safeguards the feeling of control, it may also lead to biases and premature conclusions. Once a pattern of interpretation is established, it tends to become immune to new, even clearly contradictory information. If this occurs, it is no longer the overall perception that is adapted to the new information, but vice versa.⁶⁰ This is how forms of not-wanting-to-know and conscious ignorance also find their way into decision-making processes.⁶¹

Using these reflections from political science, I will examine how English observers sought to construct a coherent narrative from disparate pieces of information. I will demonstrate how they navigated the important and the unimportant, the probable and the impossible, the credible and the incredible in order to produce certainty from the unknown, ambiguous, or dubious. The question is whether their analysis remained open to changing observations, or whether an interpretative pattern developed that solidified against further alterations. At the end of the last section, I use my findings to reflect on how the

33/2 (2008), 211–32. This paradigm change was caused by the ‘War on Terror’ after 9/11, in which states were confronted not with other states but with diffuse enemies whom they were unable to gasp, to attack, or even to address. It could be argued that this situation shows similarities with England’s situation when faced with the League.

⁵⁸ Brian C. Rathbun, ‘Uncertain about Uncertainty: Understanding the Multiple Meanings of a Crucial Concept in International Relations Theory’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 51/3 (2007), 533–57, at 546–9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 545–52.

⁶⁰ Jennifer Mitzen and Randall L. Schweller, ‘Knowing the Unknown Unknowns: Misplaced Certainty and the Onset of War’, *Security Studies*, 20/1 (2011), 2–35, at 21–2.

⁶¹ The importance of this has been emphasized in the political sciences and is also taken into consideration by Zwierlein in his historical approach to ignorance. See Cornel Zwierlein, ‘Introduction: Towards a History of Ignorance’, in Zwierlein (ed.), *Dark Side of Knowledge*, 1–47, at 3.

observers' interpretations may be explained by reference to convictions, self-perceptions, or biases. At that point, I will briefly revive the comparison with Busbecq — whose perspective I will now omit for the main part — in order to stress the specificity of the English understanding of events in France.

*II. Striving for Orientation:
Multiple Enemies, Dubious Allies, and Growing Confusion*

Alençon's death caused a highly ambiguous situation as it soon became obvious that Navarre's succession was indeed by no means secure. But while reports from France were certain that something was going on, the form and extent of the consequences were not yet foreseeable. As Stafford put it: 'some extraordinary Thing [will] happen, which everie Body looketh for, and yett they cannot judge what ytt is lyk to be.'⁶² It was entirely unclear 'what Effectes good or bad Monsieur's Death will bring us'.⁶³ In a letter to Walsingham, the French Protestant François Perrot de Mezières expressed his hope that the king would defend Navarre's claims against those who wished to plunge the country into new turmoil, and he called on the Protestant powers to support him.⁶⁴ Stafford stressed the menace of the situation by reporting on meetings of the Guises, which surely pointed to some sinister plans:

We fynd already heere that great Practyses are made, and great Counsellis are kept daylye of the contrarye Partie, great outward Shew that theie meane somewhat, and great Desiers perfectly seen eyther by spredding of false Bruites, or by underhand practysyng some bad Matter to styre some Dissention, coulered by a Beginninge of some of the Relligion.⁶⁵

⁶² Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 21 June 1584, in William Murdin (ed.), *A Collection of State Papers Relating to Affairs in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth, From the Year 1571 to 1596* (London, 1759), 409–11, at 410.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 409.

⁶⁴ François Perrot de Mezières to Walsingham, Val de Grace, 9/19 June 1584, in *CSPF*, vol. xviii.

⁶⁵ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 21 June 1584, in Murdin (ed.), *Collection*, 409–11, at 409.

Although he did not expect Henry III to support their plans – on several previous occasions he had described the king’s strong aversion to them – he noted: ‘all these shows cannot put out of some men’s heads that there is plain meaning but some hidden matter.’⁶⁶

In other words, the only certainty was uncertainty. Although the rumours spread against the Huguenots ultimately proved to be false, the situation was highly fluid. Within only a few days, Stafford acknowledged a widespread change in attitude towards Navarre and his followers:

for at the first, everie Bodie had a Respect, a good Countenance, and Eye towardes them, now theie are changed in Statu quo prius, and receive again the same Countenances theie had before the Death; and theie that afore speak and looked gentlie, doe nowe plainlye say, the King of Navarr can never be King withoute Change of Relligion.⁶⁷

Moreover, the Guises had withdrawn from court and displayed great dissatisfaction with the king, just as he did with them. But in this regard, there were uncertainties about the right interpretation: Stafford was unsure whether to take this discontent at face value.⁶⁸ As he noted, it had to be taken into consideration that Henry III himself was

Catholyk in Extremitie, led by Jesuistes, who are the only Servants and Ministers for the King of Spaine, uppon whom the Pope dependeth wholly; the House of Guise is lynked with the King of Spaine, therefore he lysteth to favor others, as is lyklye and most certen he will; then yf the Jesuists maye leade the King, the King of Spaine, the Jesuists, and the Pope coulourably them all, I conclude that ytt standeth uppon the King of Spaine’s Gretness to maintain the Pope, uppon the Pope’s Gretness to maintain the House of Guise, his onlye Pillar againe the King of Navarr; and that seeing he kanne by his Instruments leade the King, no Doubte but he will seeke to mak him enter into anye

⁶⁶ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 3 June 1584, in *CSPF*, vol. xviii.

⁶⁷ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 21 June 1584, in Murdin (ed.), *Collection*, 409–11, at 410.

⁶⁸ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 3 July 1584, in *CSPF*, vol. xviii; Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 14 July 1584, *ibid.*; Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 24 Aug. 1584, in Murdin (ed.), *Collection*, 415–19.

Dance againe the King of Navarre, and them that he taketh for his Enemyes.⁶⁹

The ambassador's doubts about the seriousness of Henry III's enmity towards the Guises also arose from the king's failure to proceed against their many public assemblies, at which they proclaimed Charles de Bourbon's right to succession. Moreover, Henry III did nothing to remove their supporters from office. Instead, and contrary to custom, he even confirmed the *prévôt des marchands* in Paris, who was well known for his steadfast support for the League, for another term.⁷⁰

However, since the late summer, some degree of orientation had been emerging from the confusion; at least the main enemy and their intentions were becoming increasingly distinct. In the early stages of the crisis, it was clearly the House of Guise that was held to be responsible, referred to as 'the Guisians',⁷¹ 'the followers of the House of Guise',⁷² or through even more complicated constructions such as 'the house of Guise and their adherents'⁷³ and 'them that were at the devotion of the house of Guise'.⁷⁴ It was not until March 1585 that the collective term 'the leaguers' appeared for the first time in the sources analysed here,⁷⁵ pointing to an abstraction away from an aristocratic party bound to a personal leader, and towards a broader movement.⁷⁶

Regarding their aims, Stafford was now convinced that they would soon orchestrate unrest in some form or another, with or without the king's consent.⁷⁷ This was widely anticipated, since it was obvious

⁶⁹ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 24 Aug. 1584, in Murdin (ed.), *Collection*, 415-19, at 417.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 21 June 1584, in Murdin (ed.), *Collection*, 409-11.

⁷² Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 3 Mar. 1585, in *CSPF*, vol. xix.

⁷³ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 10 Mar. 1585, *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 3 Mar. 1585, *ibid.*

⁷⁵ This is only a preliminary finding, because the calendars give extended quotations but not the full text.

⁷⁶ The term remains prominent throughout the years 1585-7 and then recedes into the background again.

⁷⁷ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 29 Aug. 1584, in Murdin (ed.), *Collection*, 421. Deciphered using the version in Historical Manuscripts Commission (ed.), *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. the Marquis of Salisbury, K.G., etc.*:

that they were gathering weapons and equipment,⁷⁸ and there were rumours about the recruitment of troops.⁷⁹ Stafford even warned of a massacre of the Huguenots on All Saints' Day.⁸⁰ Robert Cecil, Lord Burghley's son, who was staying in Paris at the time, held the motivations of the Guises to be evident: by seeking to prevent Navarre's succession, their ultimate aim was to seize the Crown.⁸¹ They only put forward Charles de Bourbon because they could not legitimately claim it for themselves.⁸²

With this framework at hand, the English observers were able to fill in further details in order to calculate risks. Here we can see how pieces of information were mixed in with assessments to create a reasoned expectation. In order to give a detailed report regarding the political configuration, the young Cecil had gathered information on the positioning of the leading nobles and the supposed mood of different parts of the French population. As far as the nobility was concerned, he was convinced that most of them would not be swayed by the Guisian strategy. Generally, they adhered to the Salic law unless driven to oppose it for specific reasons—and those nobles who were against Navarre were all clearly aligned with the Guises. As for the inhabitants of the major cities, however, he thought it likely that they would reject Navarre because they feared revenge for their massacres of Protestants. A notable exception was the municipal elite, who he thought would mostly favour Navarre. Regarding the provinces, Cecil found it difficult to make an assessment. Only a few regions were definitely supportive of Navarre, whereas most 'were so infected with superstition' that loyalty towards him could hardly be expected.⁸³

Preserved at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire. Part III (London 1889), 63 (hereafter CP, for Cecil Papers).

⁷⁸ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 18 Sept. 1584, in Murdin (ed.), *Collection*, 422–43, at 422. On the ongoing meetings of the Guises and their adherents see also Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 29 Aug. 1584, *ibid.* 421; Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 5 Sept. 1584, in *CSPF*, vol. xix.

⁷⁹ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 29 Oct. 1584, in *CSPF*, vol. xix.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Robert Cecil to Walsingham, Paris, 28 Sept. (New Style) 1584, in Thomas Wright (ed.), *Queen Elizabeth and her Times: A Series of Original Letters*, 2 vols. (London, 1838), ii. 237–40, at 237.

⁸² *Ibid.* 238.

⁸³ *Ibid.* 238–9; quotation at 239.

Additionally, both sides had strong foreign allies who would support them, if not openly, then discreetly.⁸⁴

Stafford sent another detailed report containing brief descriptions of the close circle of royal advisers. The categorization of their character is telling. On the one hand, there are obviously negative portrayals like: 'wicked, cruel . . . a sworn enemy to the Protestant princes and to the princes of the blood; partial for the Church of Rome; addicted to Spain, crafty and subtle, full of corruption'; on the other, there are positive ones such as: 'very honest minded, loving the state of the realm and his house, enemy in heart to Spain and to Guise, favouring in his heart the Religion'.⁸⁵ Obviously, the supposed relationship with Spain played a crucial role. Although not all members of the royal council could be so easily divided into pro- and anti-Hispanic factions – in some cases, a lack of certainty over their views was admitted⁸⁶ – this distinction was not only used to designate friend and foe but was also accompanied by the attribution of moral qualities. On the whole, Stafford held most of the royal advisers to be suspect and was convinced that Philip II had so many supporters in France that, in the event of Henry III's death, 'the realm being divided either for matter of Religion or otherwise, he might hope to have some part of it, and that not small'.⁸⁷ In other words, the activity of the Spanish Crown was a major object of suspicion, alongside and connected with the perceived threat from the Guises.

These anxieties about Philip II's influence were further fuelled by the fact that Bernardino de Mendoza, the Spanish ambassador who had been expelled from England, was now serving in Paris. According to Stafford, the French royal house was also worried about Mendoza's intentions.⁸⁸ Further concerns arose from supposed secret connections

⁸⁴ Ibid. 238–40.

⁸⁵ 'The names and dispositions of those of the Council that be ever in ordinary'; enclosure to: Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 17 July 1584, in *CSPF*, vol. xviii. The first quotation refers to Albert de Gondi, Duke of Retz, a close confidant of the king; the second to François de Bourbon, Marquess of Conti, son and brother respectively of the Huguenot leaders Louis and Henri, Princes of Condé.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Stafford to Burghley, 11 July 1584, *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 3 Nov. 1584, in *CSPF*, vol. xix; Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 7 Nov. 1584, *ibid.*; Stafford to Walsingham [Paris, 9 Dec. 1584], in *CP*, pt. iii, pp. 78–81, at 79. (The date of and some corrections to the last of these sources can be derived from *CSPF*, vol. xix.)

between the French malcontent Henri de Montmorency, the Duke of Savoy, and Philip II.⁸⁹ In particular, the planned marriage between the House of Savoy and Spain raised fears that Philip II 'pretendeth some great Enterpryse by this Matche with the Duke of Savoye, and to him the Executioner of ytt'.⁹⁰ Additionally, Stafford had heard rumours of a planned marital alliance between the Guises and Montmorency, which would close the circle of enemies – but these were as yet unconfirmed.⁹¹

As the Spaniards' bad intentions were beyond question, the uncertainty here only concerned their chances of success and the coalitions that might result. In this respect, further factual information was supposed to bring clarity. This differed from the case of Henry III, who became the biggest puzzle for Stafford: the ambassador considered the king's animosity towards the Guises to be authentic,⁹² so he could not understand why he remained largely inactive. Henry's efforts concerning the Cardinal de Bourbon could have been an attempt to detach him from the Guise faction, or equally a way of preparing the ground for the king to distance himself from Henry of Navarre.⁹³ In this regard, Stafford first of all needed a clue to interpret. Only in December 1584 could he report on the king's proceedings against the Guises and the arrest of some of their presumed agents. At the same time, however, he observed that Henry III was becoming highly suspicious of everyone, was ruling in an increasingly authoritarian manner,⁹⁴ and had augmented his personal bodyguard enormously.⁹⁵ This behaviour caused great concern among the Huguenots, even though the king had met many of their demands and his measures were currently directed against the opposing party.⁹⁶ The French king was thus proceeding in a dubious manner.

⁸⁹ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 7 Nov. 1584, in *CSPF*, vol. xix.

⁹⁰ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 18 Sept. 1584, in Murdin (ed.), *Collection*, 422–3, at 422.

⁹¹ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 28 Nov. 1584, in *CSPF*, vol. xix.

⁹² Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 22 Nov. 1584, *ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Stafford to Walsingham, [Paris, 9 Dec. 1584], in *CP*, pt. iii, p. 79.

⁹⁵ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 8 Dec. 1584, in Murdin (ed.), *Collection*, 424. See also Stafford to Walsingham, 25 Dec. 1584, *ibid.* 425–7.

⁹⁶ Stafford to Walsingham, [Paris, 9 Dec. 1584], in *CP*, pt. iii, pp. 79–80.

Further news then brought further confusion to a situation already unsettled by Stafford's distrust of the king, England's ally. That same December, Walsingham received a letter from Henry of Navarre's confidant, Jacques de Ségur de Pardaillan, reporting unrest in Brittany caused by rumours that Henry III was already dead:

I am now informed by some merchants arrived newly from Brittany, that all is in confusion there; for M. de Chasteauneuf has planned to surprise St. Malo, and gathered together a great number of men of war. It is believed there that the King is dead, which has given opportunity to M. de Chasteauneuf to make this enterprise in order to serve the Duke of Guise . . . I pray you to let me know what you have heard from France, for M. de Chasteauneuf having made a beginning in Brittany, I fear the same will be done in other places.⁹⁷

Additionally, Stafford reported that Philip II and the Guises were also seeking connections with German princes.⁹⁸ Nonetheless, he was able to give the all-clear on a different front: in several French provinces, the ultra-Catholic party had not met with the expected approval, and the relations with Savoy were not progressing as well as they had hoped either.⁹⁹

Overall, however, the English ambassador perceived the situation at the beginning of 1585 as increasingly disorientating. There were numerous rumours that could neither be confirmed nor refuted. Some suggested that Henry III was seeking to redirect the Guises' ambitions against Spain; conversely, there was speculation that he feared they were attempting to impose their agenda on him with the support of the many malcontents in the realm, while Philip II was raising troops to ally with Montmorency. However, Stafford thought it probable that all these rumours were solely invented to paralyse the king.¹⁰⁰ Near to mental paralysis himself, he remained undecided as to how to interpret the ongoing reports of the Guises'

⁹⁷ [Jacques] Segur-Pardeelhan [*sic*] to Walsingham, Hampton [Southampton], 15 Dec. 1584, in *CSPF*, vol. xix.

⁹⁸ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 17 Dec. 1584, *ibid.* (two letters).

⁹⁹ Stafford to Walsingham, 25 Dec. 1584, in Murdin (ed.), *Collection*, 425–7.

¹⁰⁰ Stafford to Walsingham, St. Denis, [12 Feb. 1585], in *CSPF*, vol. xix.

armament.¹⁰¹ On 10 March 1585 he submitted a full account of the many possible readings, but no definite analysis:

Some think they are practices of the King of Spain's faction and that the matter is nothing; which I cannot tell what to think on. Some, that they are real actions practised by the King of Spain to trouble this realm, with which opinion I could easily go. Some, that upon proofs that are made of the King's death ere long they will be ready armed for such a chance, which is neither unlike nor impossible. Some that they mean (upon the colour of seeking the relief of the oppressed people and the abolishing of the Religion, which two things carry here a fair show) to seize upon the King and make him alter his government and his governors, which is not unlikely. Some that they and the King have intelligence together to the ruin of religion and all religious persons, which I cannot tell truly what to say to.¹⁰²

This time, however, the danger proved to be not only real, but immediate: a few days later, Stafford reported that the Duke of Guise had taken Châlons without the slightest resistance.¹⁰³

Faced with this new situation of an armed insurgency by the ultra-Catholic party against the French king, Stafford remained perplexed for a while, wholly unable to anticipate what might follow.¹⁰⁴ In mid March he could at least provide more information about the self-presentation of the insurgents, who insisted that there was no foreign influence – a claim the ambassador rejected as fully implausible – and that they were just a group of nobles and clerics who wanted to remedy certain abuses within the French government.¹⁰⁵ Their demands were to secure a Catholic succession to the throne, ensure religious unity, provide tax relief for the population, and reorganize

¹⁰¹ [George] Gilpin to Walsingham, Middelburg, 21 Feb. 1585, *ibid.*; Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 1 Mar. 1585, *ibid.*; Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 3 Mar. 1585, *ibid.*; François de Civille to Walsingham, Rouen, 5/15 March 1585, *ibid.*; Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 10 Mar. 1585, *ibid.*

¹⁰² Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 10 Mar. 1585, *ibid.*

¹⁰³ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 14 Mar. 1585, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 19 Mar. 1585, in *CSPF*, vol. xix.

access to the king. To initiate these measures, they proposed convening the Estates General.¹⁰⁶

In this situation, the French correspondent François Rasse des Neux and the English special envoy William Waad—who had been sent to France to negotiate with the king—went from observation to speculation. The former suspected a connection between the Pope, Philip II, the Duke of Savoy, and the Jesuits,¹⁰⁷ while the latter considered several possible reasons for the development:

be it that the Guises are set a work by the Spaniard to decry the succour the King in likelihood was to afford to those of the Low Countries; or by their own ambition impatient of further delay; or so far discovered as they were driven to unmask themselves, or else that these be effects of the holy league, it is greatly to be feared lest some mediators working a reconciliation, all the sooner may be driven against those of the Religion.¹⁰⁸

But these observers were not the only ones who were clueless. The king himself, according to Stafford, had been caught fully unprepared. This, however, posed a danger to, as well as a chance for, the Protestant cause, as Stafford himself now began to speculate. On the one hand, it was likely that the king would endeavour to reach a quick agreement with his opponents, which would mean serious harm for the Huguenots;¹⁰⁹ on the other, he was now looking for allies, and Stafford recommended to Elizabeth that she offer her support. Ideally, this could result in an alliance between the king and the Protestants against the Guises, who then would have achieved the opposite of what they wanted.¹¹⁰

London, however, responded hesitantly. Walsingham informed Stafford that he had received secret intelligence suggesting that the Duke of Guise was not acting solely out of personal ambition, but as part of a much broader alliance that included not only the Pope, Philip II, and the Duke of Savoy, but also various Italian and German princes.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ [François] Rasse des Neux to Walsingham, Rouen, 24 Mar. 1585, in *CSPF*, vol. xix.

¹⁰⁸ [William] Waad to Walsingham, Paris, 18 Mar. 1585, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 19 Mar. 1585, *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Even the queen mother, Catherine de Medici, was rumoured to support their cause. Because Walsingham also doubted that Henry III was the right man to resist such great pressure, he ordered Stafford to gather more information about the strength of the respective parties and their potential allies.¹¹¹

Again, obtaining facts was the preferred way to minimize uncertainty. But Stafford could fulfil this request only to a limited extent because the situation was too volatile. Not only were the factual circumstances unclear, but it was also challenging to appropriately assess the situation and the actors' intentions. He reported the perceived chaos in great detail: news of captured cities was retracted, only to be confirmed again the next day. It was also impossible to estimate the size of the opposing parties, as no one knew exactly who was friend and who was foe. Rumours from the Dauphiné suggested that numerous towns had fallen to the League because its local leader, the Duke of Mayenne, was popular not only with Catholics but also with Protestants. Conversely, Henry III was offered support by the Huguenots and the Catholic malcontent Montmorency, with the former vouching for the latter's loyalty. However, the royal council recommended that this offer be rejected, so no decision had yet been made. The role of Catherine de Medici, too, remained opaque: for instance, it was alleged that she was seeking to stabilize her son's position by directing the aggression of the Guises, the Pope, and Spain against England. On the other hand, the papal nuncio gave the assurance that his master would never support unrest among Christians, claiming that the Pope was always striving for peace and harmony. To this end, he suggested that Navarre consider converting, as securing a Catholic succession was the main reason for the uprising. Due to this great uncertainty, Stafford reported, the recruitment of royal troops was not progressing either, as everyone was waiting to see how the situation would develop. Although he personally believed in the sincerity of the king, he could not see how Henry III could muster enough soldiers.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Walsingham to Stafford, 22 Mar. 1585, in *CSPF*, vol. xix.

¹¹² Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 23 Mar. 1585, *ibid.*

*III. Stabilizing and Contesting the Interpretation:
The Weakness of the League, and the King Even Weaker*

Some days later, however, Stafford asserted that the League was by no means as strong as initially feared: it had only succeeded in taking a few towns, hardly any of them were of importance, and in fact they could only be held as long as their leaders were in place. Nevertheless, the situation remained unsettled, as the royal council continued to advise against an alliance with the Huguenots, claiming that Henry III would otherwise risk turning all the Catholics in the realm against him by appearing as an ally of heretics and a traitor to his own religion.¹¹³ The Guises themselves, Stafford assumed, were willing to make peace, but could not yield too quickly, as it would make them appear faint-hearted.¹¹⁴ Samuel Daniel, the later poet, who was staying in Paris during this time as a guest of Stafford,¹¹⁵ noted a certain war-weariness in a letter to Walsingham and observed that a swift agreement was urgently needed, as the population on both sides was suffering from hunger and poverty. The nobility and the clergy had become more critical of the League's objectives, too, and support for Navarre was growing steadily.¹¹⁶

This narrative – that the League was actually weak and could not attract a significant following – subsequently became the established one. It was connected with the conviction that religion was only a pretext, and that the movement was in fact driven by ambition, for this explained why the broader population had not taken sides. The persistence of the rebellion was then explained with a nod to Henry III's ill-intentioned advisers, while the king himself was characterized as weak-willed and undecisive. Of course, this interpretation was not self-evident and was challenged again and again by contradictory observations. News of the League's strength and successes kept arriving and, as mentioned earlier, the wider support base of the League

¹¹³ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 26 Mar. 1585, *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ John Pitcher, 'Samuel Daniel: New and Future Research', in *Oxford Handbook Topics in Literature*, online edn. (Oxford, 2013), at [<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.013.88>].

¹¹⁶ Samuel Daniell to Walsingham, Paris, Mar. 1585, in *CSPF*, vol. xix.

was now becoming recognizable. In fact, it was Daniel who first used the abstract term 'leaguers' in his letter. This may have been connected with the League's *Declaration des causes, qui ont meu Monseigneur le Cardinal de Bourbon, & les Princes, Pairs . . . de s'opposer à ceux qui veulent subuertir la Religion & l'Estat*, which appeared at roughly the same time.¹¹⁷ As can be seen in the title, the Cardinal de Bourbon was presented as spokesperson instead of the Guises. Even though this need not be taken at face value, it became obvious that the movement was more than the House of Guise and its direct clientele. Recognizing this, however, made the situation even more complex.

English observers were again faced with the difficulty of developing a coherent picture. On the one hand, they succeeded in overcoming the peak of confusion that characterized the previous months, when new information often did not help to clarify the situation but only added to the chaos. Gradually – and with setbacks – an interpretative framework emerged into which new information could be placed, or which at least served as a kind of safe haven when the threat of disorientation arose again. However, this sometimes involved ignoring or bending information that did not fit. The broader support for the League, for example, was occasionally taken into account and reflected upon, only to be relegated to the background once again.

One such destabilizing event occurred in April 1585, when Stafford was forced to qualify his previous optimism as he reported the secession of Orleans and numerous other cities of importance. Even the loyalty of Paris was in doubt, but though Henry III hesitated to station troops there, he dared not leave his capital. Particularly troublesome were the clergy, as rumours were circulating that Jesuit priests would only grant absolution to those who promised to join the League.¹¹⁸ Their role also became evident with the case of Mary Stuart's agent, Thomas Morgan, for it was primarily the clergy who vehemently condemned the English government's demand for him to be surrendered,

¹¹⁷ *Declaration des causes, qui ont meu Monseigneur le Cardinal de Bourbon, & les Princes, Pairs, Prelats, Seigneurs, Villes, & Communautez Catholiques de ce Royaume de France, de s'opposer à ceux qui veulent subuertir la Religion & l'Estat* ([Peronne], 1585).

¹¹⁸ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 1 Apr. 1585, in *CSPF*, vol. xix; see also Advertisements from Paris, 5/15 Apr. 1585, *ibid.*

and who stridently warned Henry III against handing over a good Catholic to the heretic queen.¹¹⁹ The fact that the activity of preachers began to be mentioned in the reports illustrates a broadening of the English observers' understanding of the League's social basis.

However, Elizabeth's envoy William Waad, who negotiated Morgan's extradition, gave no credence to the religious motivation of the League because the king himself was also Catholic. Consequently, Waad also struggled to grasp the challenges facing Henry III, dismissing his reasons for refusing to hand over Morgan as cheap excuses.¹²⁰ Failing to recognize the extent of France's internal crisis, the English officials insisted on the interpretation that the insurgence had been initiated from outside France – with Philip II of Spain as the evil mastermind in the background. Thus they exhorted Henry III to face his enemies with courage, and offered support.¹²¹ Here, the psychological aspect came into play: because Stafford could not understand Henry III's practical reasons for rejecting English advice, he explained it with reference to the king's mindset. The ambassador stated that the king was 'so much betrayed within himself that every score is made to him a thousand, and jealousy put into his head of every town in France to be ready to take their [the League's] part, which in truth is not so'.¹²²

At the same time, however, several reports from France emphasized the broad support for the League.¹²³ In May, the Protestant Claude-Antoine de Vienne, Seigneur de Clervant, confidentially reported to Walsingham:

Sir, I will say this much only unto you; that the state of France standeth in so ill terms as a man would think that the inhabitants thereof had both lost their sense and forgotten their

¹¹⁹ Waad to Walsingham, Paris, 1 Apr. 1585, *ibid.* The complex role of Morgan, which cannot be presented here, is a controversial topic in research. Was he the evil mastermind behind many of the conspiracies against Elizabeth, or was he rather a moderate, or even one of Walsingham's many double agents? See Bossy, *Under The Molehill*, ch. 1, 13–28.

¹²⁰ Waad to Walsingham, Paris, 1 Apr. 1585, in *CSPF*, vol. xix.

¹²¹ Instructions for Sir Thomas Layton, 1 Apr. 1585, *ibid.*

¹²² Stafford to Walsingham, 10 Apr. 1585, *ibid.*

¹²³ e.g. News from Paris, Paris, 26 Apr./6 May 1585, *ibid.*; John Spritwell's Report, 1 May 1585, *ibid.*

wanted love to their prince and to their blood of France, which change happeneth by the practice and working of preachers and confessors procured thereunto by the pestilent sect of Jesuits. Our league men pretend a colour of religion and of the common weal, and their end tendeth to the overthrow both of the one and the other, whereby they may the easilier attain to that they have long wished for.¹²⁴

Stafford, in contrast, reaffirmed the established picture: the League itself consisted primarily of the House of Guise, which had barely managed to gain any supporters, and they could be expected to lose most of them again soon. Their troops were poorly equipped, their financial resources were dwindling, and they could only sustain themselves due to the indecisiveness of the king, who continued to heed his treacherous advisers. If Henry III were to firmly confront the League over their offences against him and the state, they would surely collapse.¹²⁵ While further news initially gave Stafford confidence that Henry III would soon take the initiative and was only awaiting additional troops,¹²⁶ his hopes were soon dashed; in early June, the ambassador reported that the king commanded far more soldiers than the opposite side, but still remained inactive.¹²⁷

Evidently, this interpretation was fully adhered to by the government, too. When Elizabeth herself addressed the French king, she admonished him not to yield to those 'traitorous and rebellious subjects' any longer.¹²⁸ It was evident that religion was only a pretext, while the true goal of the League was 'to reign under your name, but devoted to themselves'.¹²⁹ No sovereign should allow that, and if Henry III would accept her help, the insurrection could easily be quelled. She even added a personal exhortation: 'If it pleases you to reawaken your royal spirits, you will see that the two of us . . . will make them feel the greatest shame that rebels have ever known'.¹³⁰

¹²⁴ [Claude Antoine de Vienne, Seigneur de] Clervant to Walsingham, 3/13 May 1585, *ibid.*

¹²⁵ Stafford to Burghley, Paris, 4 May 1585, *ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 5 June 1585, in *CSPF*, vol. xix.

¹²⁸ Elizabeth to the French King [Henry III], May 1585, *ibid.* Translations my own.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

For as soon as the king demonstrated strength, all his loyal subjects would surely follow him. His insistence on peace, in contrast, was misguided, as the queen declared: 'better to lose 20,000 men than to reign at the pleasure of rebels'.¹³¹ The Guises' behaviour was a continued insult to His Majesty which he should tolerate no longer, for complying with their conditions would mean not only dishonour for him but also the loss of his state.¹³²

To the French side, however, this counsel evidently seemed somewhat one-sided and undifferentiated. The French ambassador to England, Michel de Castelnau, tried to give a more comprehensive account of Henry III's problematic situation: if the conflict with the League was not resolved soon, it could result in 'the last extremity of the greatest war that has been for three hundred years in France'. The outcome of that war was by no means predictable; although the Guises had not been entirely successful, 'yet they had such parties within the kingdom that those most zealous and resolute to live or die for the king do not see how by arms his Majesty can get the upper hand in these affairs'.¹³³ This rather pessimistic account was further supported by repeated reports of additional troops joining the League, so Stafford's assertion of a clear advantage for the king proved to be merely a momentary perception.¹³⁴

In line with this, the French Protestant Clervant reported on 22 June that a peace treaty between the king and the League was imminent. This would bring the abolition of tolerance, thus forcing all Protestants to convert within six months or leave the country. While more pessimistic about the factual situation than the English observers, the French correspondent supported the narrative of the weak king surrounded by malign counsellors. In his opinion, these measures were being imposed upon Henry III, who was well aware that the League's objectives were political rather than religious. But his counsellors had consistently exaggerated the strength of the opposition and intimidated him with the threat of excommunication by the Pope. Clervant

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ [Michel de Castelnau, Seigneur de la] Mauvissière to [Charles] Lord Howard, Grand Chamberlain, London, 6/16 May 1585, in *CSPF*, vol. xix.

¹³⁴ French Advices, [May 1585], *ibid.*; News From Divers Parts, 6/16 June 1585, *ibid.*; News from Divers Parts, 10/20 June 1585, *ibid.*

believed that this was the only reason the House of Guise was now gaining so much power

that they may make themselves Earls of Champagne, Dukes of Burgundy, and lords of a third part of all the other provinces of France, by means of the holds that have been granted unto them and of the reputation they have gotten by their forcing of the King, and dispersing of our churches against his will.¹³⁵

Clervant's apprehensions were largely correct: on 27 June/7 July 1585, the Treaty of Nemours was concluded, in which Henry III accepted nearly all the League's demands, and thus the war against the Huguenots was resumed. Hence, for the next four years, the French conflict returned to its classic battle lines: the king and the Catholics against the Protestants. Stafford, however, continued to report fierce tensions between Henry III and the Guises.¹³⁶ In March 1586, he even wrote that Henry secretly favoured the Protestant party:

The King carrieth himself so as the League suspect him marvelously, and the others have no great cause to trust him; as for my part, I do not, but it is generally thought he is pleased with anything done against them, and that his show of dislike of any help given to the others is but that they have the hand over him yet, and the Queen Mother their friend.¹³⁷

Yet, as Walsingham reported to Stafford, the new French ambassador Châteauneuf had explicitly warned Elizabeth not to intervene in internal French conflicts, for this was 'not agreeable with the ancient treaties, by the which they were bound reciprocally not to maintain each other's rebels'. At the same time, he had asked her to urge Navarre to convert, because this was 'the only way to work his own good, and to restore the poor afflicted realm of France to his former repose'.¹³⁸ The queen had flatly rejected this proposal. Giving an account of her reasoning, Walsingham wrote that besides

¹³⁵ Clervant to Walsingham, Paris, 22 June/2 July 1585, *ibid.*

¹³⁶ Stafford to Burghley, Paris, 1 July 1585, *ibid.*; Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 14 Feb. 1586, in *CSPF*, vol. xx.

¹³⁷ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 6 Mar. 1586, in *CSPF*, vol. xx.

¹³⁸ [Walsingham] to Stafford, 9 Mar. 1586, *ibid.*

her unwillingness to persuade a co-religionist to apostatize, she had argued that Navarre's conversion would not be in Henry III's interest either, as it would inevitably weaken Navarre and thereby strengthen the League. The king should not delude himself into thinking that this was a religious issue, for the Guises 'sought nothing else but most ambitiously the advancement of their own credits.' The Huguenots, in any case, had not provoked these acts of violence but had remained loyal to the Crown.¹³⁹

In Elizabeth's name, Walsingham also instructed Stafford to remind Henry III that, from the very beginning, the League

under pretext of religion sought to possess themselves of the principal towns in that realm, with intent, howsoever it fall out, to continue the possession of the said towns, whereby they may both be better able to bridle the said King for the time present, as also to execute their other designs in time future.¹⁴⁰

Again, he was employing the narrative of the weak and ill-advised king: the League had succeeded in manipulating Henry III, who should recognize that Navarre was 'the only stay and impediment of their malicious intents and designs' and act accordingly. But, as Walsingham admitted, this was a fairly improbable outcome, since the king was 'so weak minded as he is, and betrayed by his mother, who, despairing of his life, buildeth her future standing upon the house of Guise, which she thinketh to make more assured by the overthrow of the King of Navarre'. Therefore, the power of the Duke of Guise would continue to grow.¹⁴¹

While this account fits with the established line of interpretation, Stafford at least seems to have arrived at a more nuanced picture of Henry III's dilemma in the further course of events. Although he remained convinced that the king ultimately despised the League more than Henry of Navarre,¹⁴² he equally held that he was not willing to make any concessions on the religious question.¹⁴³ The

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 15 Apr. 1586, in *CSPF*, vol. xx; Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 15 July 1586, in *CSPF*, vol. xxi, pt. i; Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 14 Aug. 1586, *ibid.*

¹⁴³ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 15 Apr. 1586, in *CSPF*, vol. xx.

ambassador now realized that the trust between the king and his Catholic subjects was severely damaged. Time and again, the king's decrees were rejected and his orders were disobeyed, and sometimes resistance even escalated into violence. As hardly any agreement could be reached, the situation led to a kind of stalemate. The ambassador thus concluded: 'there is nothing like to follow but sedition or worse.'¹⁴⁴ This deterioration in relations between Henry III and the population also affected the capital: as rumours spread that Henry III was planning to disarm the city, fears of impending unrest grew.¹⁴⁵ At the same time, Stafford emphasized the international dimension of the conflict. He repeatedly reported on the connections between Spain and the League¹⁴⁶ and passed on speculations that Spain was preparing a naval assault on England¹⁴⁷—pointing towards the Armada of 1588.

The entanglement with England's own domestic affairs became evident in 1587; once again, it was the case of Mary Stuart that led to tensions. On the diplomatic level, this centred around the French ambassador Châteauneuf, who seemed to be involved in the Babington Plot—the latest attempt on the queen's life. Elizabeth once more dispatched William Waad as special envoy to deal with the affair. However, the international connections made it advisable to proceed with caution; Waad and Stafford warned their government that tensions between Elizabeth and Henry III would only strengthen Philip II and the Guises.¹⁴⁸ The distrust between the two monarchs, as Walsingham also recognized, provided an opportunity for the League to further sway Henry III to their side.¹⁴⁹ Equally distressing were the widespread sympathies among French Catholics for Mary and their

¹⁴⁴ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 24 June 1586, in *CSPF*, vol. xxi, pt. i; see also Stafford to Walsingham, 15 June 1586, *ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Stafford to Walsingham, [Paris], 3 July 1586, *ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 14 Aug. 1586, *ibid.*; Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 20 Aug. 1586, *ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 14 July 1586, *ibid.*; French Advertisements from the Court, 27 Mar./6 Apr. 1586, in *CSPF*, vol. xx.

¹⁴⁸ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 24 Mar. 1587, in *CSPF*, vol. xxi, pt. i; Waad to Walsingham, Paris, 4 May 1587, *ibid.* (two letters).

¹⁴⁹ Walsingham to [Robert Dudley,] the Earl of Leicester, at the Court, 3 Apr. 1587, in Wright, *Queen Elizabeth*, ii. 335–6, at 335.

consternation over her judgement and execution.¹⁵⁰ Evidently, Mary's fate further fuelled the English government's image as a tyrannical Protestant regime persecuting innocent Catholics.¹⁵¹

In this context, Stafford described a situation which demonstrated the great agitation of the population. A panel had been erected in the churchyard of Saint-Séverin depicting the Catholic martyrs in England, arousing great attention and emotion:

I never saw a thing done with that fury nor with that danger of a great emotion as that hath brought; for I think not so few as five thousand people a day come to see it . . . Others aposted purposely for the matter, show them how likely Catholics are to grow to that point in France if they have a King an heretic, and that they are at the next door to it, which indeed is the chief intent that the thing is set there, to animate and mutiny the people; and withal there is a book set out to the same effect . . . wherein is contained as much as is in the table set up, with the Queen of Scots' death, whom they will have a martyr, added in the end, and their conclusion to their purpose to mutiny the people, both against Huguenots, the succession of Huguenots, and the Catholics associate that hold their part.¹⁵²

Stafford, who urged the civil authorities to proceed against this provocation, realized that they were also powerless against the clergy and the zealots. A priest who was called upon to take down the picture flatly refused to obey the magistrate because he was 'a layman', and even announced he would excommunicate whoever took it away. In fact, the picture was guarded round the clock. According to Stafford, the priest's 'furious threatenings if it be taken away' caused the greatest fear he had experienced since arriving in France. Further magistrates he called in were also intimidated; the *premier président* of the Parlement of Paris was warned that if anyone should

¹⁵⁰ [Paul Choart, Seigneur de] Buzanval to Burghley, London, 11 Jan. 1587, in *CSPF*, vol. xxi, pt. i; Stafford to Burghley, Paris, 5 Mar. 1587, *ibid.*; Waad to Burghley, 6 Mar. 1587, *ibid.*; Waad to Walsingham, 4 May 1587, *ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Wilkinson, *Mary Queen of Scots*, 103–27; Charles Giry-Deloison, 'France and Elizabethan England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 14 (2004), 223–42.

¹⁵² Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 22 June 1587, in *CSPF*, vol. xxi, pt. i.

take away the picture, 'the fault should be upon him, and he should have his throat cut for it; and upon this the people more mutinied than ever, and counsels given them and oaths made to come to my house and use violence'.¹⁵³ As further events showed, the French government was unable to alleviate the situation. Only a few days later, an advertisement from Paris reported on a mutiny 'about the curate of St. Severin, whom the King commanded to be apprehended for using some large speeches in his preaching; but the people rose and rescued him, and hurt divers.'¹⁵⁴ The king's authority was indeed severely damaged.

The English interpretation was destabilized on the one hand by the realization that the enemy had far more support than assumed, and on the other because Stafford repeatedly voiced criticism of the French Protestants, thereby compromising the allies. Given the widespread destruction and supply shortages, he said, they should recognize that peace was an option worth considering. Yet, by their insistence on war, they were forcing Henry III to maintain his alliance with the League.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, since many French perceived the Protestant attacks on Catholic cities as direct assaults on both the state and the monarchy, Navarre was continuously losing support among the population.¹⁵⁶ According to the ambassador, this unfortunate situation could have been avoided if, at the height of their power, the Huguenots had limited themselves to reasonable demands for freedom of conscience and security, which Henry III would certainly have accommodated. It was now obvious, Stafford continued, that they were motivated more by worldly ambition than by genuine faith, just like the Guises. He even interpreted Navarre's refusal to convert as a mere consequence of his rivalry with the other Huguenot leader, the Prince of Condé: Navarre was not willing to give up his role as leader of the Protestants as long as he could not be sure of being recognized by the Catholics. But even his own allies were beginning to doubt his steadfastness in faith.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Advertisements from France, 17/27 Aug. 1587, in *CSPF*, vol. xxi, pt. i.

¹⁵⁵ Stafford to Burghley, Paris, 17 Nov. 1586, *ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Stafford to Walsingham, 24 Mar. 1587, *ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Stafford to Burghley, Paris, 8 Jan. 1588, *ibid.*

However, Stafford remained convinced that

the King desireth nothing more than (if the colour of religion were taken away, wherewith these Leaguers cut his throat, both towards the Pope and towards all the chief towns of France) to have means in advancing them [the Huguenots] somewhat (though he will never advance them too much) to pull down the League throughly and ruin them for ever, and upon that durst I lay my life, and that there is nothing that he hateth so much as the Duke of Guise and the League, nor whose throats he would cut so soon.¹⁵⁸

That the French Protestants were nevertheless urging Elizabeth to break with Henry III, the ambassador continued, showed their poor judgement and their unreliability. Being in enmity with Spain, England could not afford a conflict with France and should endeavour to maintain good relations with Henry III. Stafford asked Burghley to advise the queen not to become too deeply entangled in conflicts that would threaten her own country, and to avoid spending too much money on people who did not deserve her support. Besides, the French Protestants were not in such a bad position; they could hold their own without English assistance.¹⁵⁹

In a personal conversation with Henry III at the end of February 1588, Stafford had the chance to hear the king's own assessment of the situation, which he reported directly to Elizabeth. The king had assured him that he was personally willing to grant tolerance, but added that it would not be feasible politically in the current situation. The fact that the Protestants had sought foreign support made it impossible for him to side with them. Moreover, as they had turned not only against the League but directly against him, he had no option but to join forces with the League and thereby increase its power. In Henry's view, the only way to deprive the League of its followers would be to convince Navarre to convert and lay down his arms, since it was primarily the fear of a Protestant king and the suppression of their religion that was driving Catholics to resist. If this danger were averted, the League would quickly collapse.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Stafford to the Queen, Paris, 25 Feb. 1588, in *CSPF*, vol. xxi, pt. i.

As we can see, Navarre's conversion increasingly came to be seen as the solution to the contradiction between his legitimate right of succession and his religion, which many found intolerable. But he was not ready to take this step at the time; nor was the English government willing to support this option, which would mean losing a Protestant ally on the Continent. The following month, as no solution had been found, Stafford reported the further derogation of the king's authority.¹⁶¹ In addition, the Protestant party had been seriously weakened by the death of Condé. In this regard, the ambassador reiterated his observation of rising tensions within the Protestant camp: there was growing suspicion of Navarre's reliability in religious matters, and Stafford himself was concerned about Navarre's potential heavy-handedness now that Condé was no longer a restraining influence.¹⁶² At this point, all of the ambassador's reports seemed to recommend a re-evaluation of the English strategy.

*IV. Not Seeing and Not Wanting to See:
Barricades on the Streets and Barriers in the Mind?*

Shortly after Stafford advised caution towards Navarre's faction, a representative of the latter, Michel Hurault de L'Hospital du Fay, approached Burghley and warned him that all of England's support would be in vain if Elizabeth slackened in her commitment now. It was in her interest to continue supporting Navarre not only for religious reasons but also for political ones, because every setback for him was a victory for Philip II of Spain. If only out of concern for her own safety, Elizabeth must seek to weaken the Guises, whose growing power – through their connections to Scotland – would ultimately pose a threat to England herself:

Thus, she must aid the King of Navarre in such sort that he be not only maintained as regards his own party, but that he may preserve his hopes and right of succession to the crown, since she sees that the King of Spain, her enemy, openly supports the

¹⁶¹ Stafford to Burghley, Paris, 11 Mar. 1588, *ibid.*

¹⁶² Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 17 March 1588, *ibid.*

party of the Guises. For if she be still at war with Spain, she has very great reason to desire our preservation, for her own safety; and if she makes peace, she must yet always fear war so long as there is a Pope; yet these dangers may be kept at a distance by giving us a more liberal aid.¹⁶³

If the cause of the French Protestants were lost, L'Hospital stressed, the common enemy would surely turn against England.¹⁶⁴ By directing the view to the international field and thereby to the dangers for England herself, he certainly attracted attention. This line of argument, which favoured foreign over domestic policy and power politics over religious motivations, may have been primarily strategic; besides being used in earlier attempts by the Huguenots to secure Elizabeth's assistance,¹⁶⁵ it was also prominent in Elizabeth's advocacy for Navarre's cause among other Protestant princes.¹⁶⁶ The reference to Spain was evidently intended to make external powers aware of the larger dimension of the conflict and thus persuade them that support for the Huguenots would follow from their own security interests. But being strategic by no means meant being untruthful. In fact, in April 1588 news arrived from Cadiz, via Rouen, that Spain was preparing its fleet.¹⁶⁷

So the English government turned from interpretation to information gathering once again, which of course included factual uncertainties and therefore reasoned speculations. The informant from Rouen thought it likely that landings would be made in Scotland, but, as he explicitly admitted, this could not be confirmed, for 'no man could certainly say to what place they should go'.¹⁶⁸ Stafford was alarmed. In late April, he passed on information from Mendoza: Spain was building a huge fleet, and people were saying '[t]hat all this is for

¹⁶³ M[ichel] H[urault] de L'Hospital du Fay to Burghley, 1 Apr. 1588, *ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ See e.g. The King of Navarre to Walsingham, Bragerac [*sic*], 28 Apr./8 May 1585, in *CSPF*, vol. xix; [Philippe de Mornay, Seigneur] Du Plessis[-Marli] to Walsingham, Bergerac, 9 May 1585, *ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ See e.g. Instructions for Thomas Bodleigh, sent to the King of Denmark, 17 Apr. 1585, *ibid.*; The Queen to Duke [John] Casimir [Count Palatine of the Rhine], [Apr. 1585], *ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ 'Advertisements from "Roan" of the preparation of the King of Spain', 2/12 Apr. 1588, in *CSPF*, vol. xxi, pt. i. ¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

England. That they mean to take some place upon the sea coast fit to fortify. That the most they fear is to be charged with horsemen at their first landing.' But Stafford added that significant moral doubts about this interlocutor were warranted; it was by no means certain whether Mendoza's information was true or merely intended to mislead.¹⁶⁹

However, as uncertain information seemed better than no information at all, he continued by informing his government that the Spanish ambassador had contacted Charles Paget and Thomas Morgan, the Lords of Paget and Westmoreland – that is, the usual suspects among the English exiles in France when it came to conspiracies¹⁷⁰ – to tell them 'they must now pray and make themselves ready, for ere long now they should be restored into their country and goods'. Furthermore, Stafford passed on rumours that some Scottish harbours would be handed over to the Spaniards, whose invasion would thereby be supported by a considerable group of locals. Adding plenty of further information from Ireland, Spain, and even the German lands, he nevertheless had to admit that everything was highly unreliable because 'they give out so many tales that there is almost nothing to be believed but that which a man seeth'.¹⁷¹ From then on, Stafford regularly reported new rumours about the Armada, but they were always highly inconclusive.¹⁷²

Since Stafford was primarily concerned with the international scene and the looming threat to England, his observations on the French situation were at that time somewhat neglected, so that he largely missed the developments that led to the *journée des barricades*, the Paris uprising of 2/12 May. He could, however, have been more attentive to a number of indications. Reporting his negotiations with Henry III's secretary, he informed Elizabeth that the king had rejected her proposals for a settlement with the Protestant party. Although the king acknowledged them to be perfectly reasonable, he was afraid of a 'general revolt of the chiefest and greatest towns in France' if he

¹⁶⁹ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 24 Apr. 1588, in *CSPF*, vol. xxi, pt. i.

¹⁷⁰ See their – still debated – roles in the Throckmorton, Parry, and Babington Plots, e.g. in Francis Edwards, *Plots and Plotters in the Reign of Elizabeth I* (Dublin, 2002), 77–168.

¹⁷¹ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 24 Apr. 1588, in *CSPF*, vol. xxi, pt. i.

¹⁷² Leimon and Parker interpret these vague reports as the final proof of his treachery. See Leimon and Parker, 'Treason and Plot', 1152–4.

showed leniency on the religious question. In the current situation, he feared that any imprudent step would 'put himself in a hazard of losing them all in a day'.¹⁷³ Stafford evidently did not take this threat at face value. Instead, he fell back on the established interpretation that the king's lack of courage and the bad advice of his counsellors were the reasons for his hesitation. Thus he concluded:

my poor advice is, as it was in my last, no way in the world to expect any thing of certain from hence, not [but] that I think of the King as well as he can wish but I see his courage so weak that he will be able to do nothing, what will soever he hath, and that by little and by little, Queen Mother will bring him so far in, that what list soever the King, he shall be brought to what she listeth.¹⁷⁴

Stafford did not consider the possibility that the danger Henry III feared might be real, and that the king might have just cause for hesitation. This changed to some extent on 12 April, when he had to confess his uncertainty about the rumours circulating that the Paris Leaguers were plotting something against the king. The ambassador now saw the real danger of major turmoil.¹⁷⁵ Alarming news also came from Rouen: there were rumours of a planned massacre of royal officials and Protestants during a procession. The massacre was thwarted by stringent security measures, but these greatly agitated the clergy.¹⁷⁶ At this point, an explosive atmosphere was palpable.

But only a few days later, Stafford assured his government that 'all stirs be pacified'. Again, he stuck to the established pattern: the League was actually weak, and had been weakened even further by severe financial difficulties. 'The League (though some here hold it up all they can), was never so bare, neither hath any one of them almost a penny. The clergy is their only support here, and doth keep the towns in liking with them, and withdraws them all they can from the King.'¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ Stafford to the Queen, Paris, 5 Apr. 1588, in *CSPF*, vol. xxi, pt. i.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 12 Apr. 1588, in *CSPF*, vol. xxi, pt. i.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 23 Apr. 1588, in *CSPF*, vol. xxi, pt. i; see also Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 27 Apr. 1588, *ibid.*

Nonetheless, the League's demands on the king were excessive, leading Henry III to adopt a harsher stance towards them. But the royal council, and especially the queen mother, pleaded for reconciliation and agreement, so Henry III once again gave in and sent an envoy to the Duke of Guise.¹⁷⁸

By falling back on the established explanation, Stafford had clearly misinterpreted the situation, for the Paris uprising was beginning to take shape. That same day – 29 April/9 May – the Duke of Guise arrived in Paris to negotiate with the king. On this occasion, Stafford again perceived great unrest in the city. Upon returning from the Louvre, he 'found all the gentlemen coming in at the lower gate by flocks, and all the world in a murmur, and Swisses and soldiers coming that way from all places and met at the gate'.¹⁷⁹ Consequently, he dispatched several observers to monitor the situation, but he could not gather any information about the content of Henry III's secret deliberations. What he did notice, however, was the social isolation of the Duke of Guise: only a few people accompanied him, and he received no public salutations.¹⁸⁰ Nevertheless, the government evidently felt threatened and responded to this sense of insecurity by significantly reinforcing the guards. It seems Stafford himself was deeply concerned, for he concluded his letter with: 'God save us all. In haste.'

In the *Calendars of the State Papers, Foreign Series*, these were Stafford's final words before the *journée des barricades*, which occurred three days later.¹⁸¹ That day, which is interpreted in the research as a key event in the history of the League and commonly as a sign of the Parisian revolutionary movement's autonomy from its aristocratic leaders,¹⁸² is thus barely visible in Stafford's letters. Only on 5/15 May did a brief,

¹⁷⁸ Stafford to the Queen, Paris, 29 Apr. 1588, *ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Stafford to Walsingham, [Paris, 29 Apr. 1588], *ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.* See, however, Mark Traugott, *The Insurgent Barricade* (Berkeley, 2010), 28–9: 'a crowd estimated at 30,000 gathered along his route to shower the leader of the Holy League with expressions of affection and acclaim.'

¹⁸¹ His letter of 3 May, to which he refers in his following report, is missing.

¹⁸² e.g. Traugott, *Insurgent Barricade*, 26. See also Stuart Carroll, 'The Revolt of Paris, 1588: Aristocratic Insurgency and the Mobilization of Popular Support', *French Historical Studies*, 23/2 (2000), 301–37, at 301–2. Carroll emphasizes the close cooperation between the Guises and the Paris Sixteen; however, even he does not see the Guises as dominant.

retrospective report follow, in which he delineated the ‘sudden “horlyborlye” of the King’s departure’. He stated that, for the moment, the Parisians, ‘what fury soever they were in, are marvellously amazed’, and that ‘as yet the Duke of Guise is not remained full master of this town’. But once again, the ambassador did not dare to estimate what could follow,¹⁸³ so we have no elaborate analysis of these events.

But not only is the *journée des barricades* itself scarcely described or analysed in Stafford’s reports—the fact that he sent a personal messenger to convey more information rather speaks for the importance he ascribed to it¹⁸⁴—its genesis, too, is absent from his observations. Whether it was because the English ambassador was preoccupied with the international situation or because the insurgents had actually managed to keep the planning secret, something had evidently escaped his attention. Even if the *journée des barricades* itself may have been given its impetus by spontaneous popular action, the infamous Paris Sixteen had been planning some kind of incident since at least 1587.¹⁸⁵ And while the French king was well informed about these activities by his spy Poulain,¹⁸⁶ the English ambassador evidently was not. As we have seen, in most of his letters he had portrayed the League as a tiny minority: the House of Guise and a few noble adherents, some fanatical priests, and—only occasionally—a crowd of zealots. At no point did his reports indicate the possibility of an uprising supported by a broad mass of people. Instead, he had always conveyed the impression that the League could only survive through Spanish support and Henry III’s laxity.

This raises the question of whether Stafford might have picked up on different indications at all. Was his limited perspective due to always engaging with the same interlocutors? Did he overlook the mood of the population because he moved in diplomatic circles and mainly talked to the king, his officials and courtiers, and diplomatic colleagues? Although this may have been a factor, it is not entirely convincing, as

¹⁸³ Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, Sunday 5 May 1588, in *CSPF*, vol. xxi, pt. i.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*; Stafford to Burghley, Paris, 17 May 1588, in *CSPF*, vol. xxi, pt. i.

¹⁸⁵ Carroll, ‘Revolt of Paris’, 321–7.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.* See also ‘Le procez-verbal d’un nommé Nicolas Poulain’, in Louis Cimber and Felix Danjou (eds.), *Archives curieuses de l’histoire de France depuis Louix XI jusqu’à Louis XVIII*, vol. i (Paris, 1836), 289–323.

his embassy was located ‘in the heart of Left Bank radicalism’¹⁸⁷ and was staffed by a wide range of personnel who necessarily cultivated connections with their everyday social environment.¹⁸⁸ And the French government, with which Stafford was in direct conversation only some weeks before the situation escalated, was better informed and argued accordingly. In this case, the established narrative of the king’s indecisiveness apparently impaired Stafford’s perception.

Another explanation for the narrow focus of Stafford’s reports would be to see it as a conscious strategy. If the ambassador had been bought by Spain and the Guises and had accordingly supplied Elizabeth with false information, he would then have deliberately concealed the size of the movement to lull the queen into a false sense of security.¹⁸⁹ However, if we shift our perspective from the concrete events of the *journée des barricades* to the general picture, we see that Stafford broadly stuck to the interpretation shared by most English observers. If anything, he was at least for a time more nuanced than the majority of them, and occasionally even emphasized the League’s successes.

If we step back from Stafford to the wider English perspective, the first question is: what are the probable alternatives to the pattern of interpretation that was employed by English observers? One would be John Salmon’s older view, derived from his analysis of public discourse, that the French Wars of Religion were understood by English contemporaries primarily as a confessional conflict.¹⁹⁰ However, this

¹⁸⁷ Carroll, ‘Revolt of Paris’, 333.

¹⁸⁸ Recent scholarship on diplomacy stresses the importance of practices and the social embedding of the ambassador, and thus also shows the importance of actors who were not state officials. For an overview, see Jan Hennings and Tracey A. Sowerby, ‘Introduction: Practices of Diplomacy’, in Jan Hennings and Tracey A. Sowerby (eds.), *Practices of Diplomacy in the Early Modern World c.1410–1800* (London, 2017), 1–21.

¹⁸⁹ On this point, my interpretation clearly differs from Leimon and Parker’s, who see in Stafford an exaggeration of the dangers posed by the French Catholics compared to the Spanish threat. See Leimon and Parker, ‘Treason and Plot’, 1152–3.

¹⁹⁰ Salmon, *The French Religious Wars*, 15: ‘The politics of the various French factions appeared merely as the reflection of the greater contest between Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Later it became possible to regard them as a number of secular forces competing for power within a single society.’

clearly does not fit with the diplomatic correspondence analysed here. Another possibility would be that they read the events as a Catholic popular uprising carried out by uneducated masses blinded by their superstition, as might be suggested by England's own experiences with subversive or even rebellious Catholic subjects.¹⁹¹ But as we have seen, this was not the case either. On the contrary, despite sporadic indications in the other direction, the English observers largely failed to recognize the religious motivation – which Waad explicitly rejected as implausible – and therefore the broad basis of the League. By overlooking the extent of France's internal political crisis, they concluded that Henry III could and should take a firm stance against the League.

Against this background, the English observers rejected as a mere excuse the argument made by Henry III and his entourage that accepting support from the French Huguenots or Protestant England would only worsen the king's situation, or interpreted it as proof that the king was being betrayed by his ill-intentioned advisers. So, for want of comprehensible reasons on the factual level, they turned to Henry III's personality: the king's indecision and hesitation seemed to be the main obstacles to a resolution of French affairs. As Stafford proclaimed in April 1586: 'if the French King had the grace of himself or . . . were not betrayed . . . the Duke of Guise's party were soon at an end.'¹⁹² As we have seen, this line was fully adhered to by the English government and shaped Elizabeth's arguments when she personally addressed the French king. As for the proposal that the French government made to Elizabeth in return, namely to persuade Henry of Navarre to convert in order to pacify the situation, the queen rejected it as being as dishonourable as it was misguided.

This outlook could not become possible until Englishmen had themselves experienced the turmoil of civil war.'

¹⁹¹ At the latest since the bull *Regnans in Excelsis* of 1570 – and not least because of it – the close connection between Catholicism and treason had become almost a commonplace. See Hammer, 'Catholic Threat', and Carol Z. Wiener, 'The Beleaguered Isle: A Study of Elizabethan and Early Jacobean Anti-Catholicism', *Past & Present*, 51 (1971), 27–62. On the developing contradiction between 'Englishness' and 'Catholicism', see also Hilary Larkin, *The Making of Englishmen: Debates on National Identity 1550–1650* (Leiden, 2014), 131–65.

¹⁹² Stafford to Walsingham, Paris, 10 Apr. 1585, in *CSPF*, vol. xix.

The aim of these considerations is not to speculate on how events might have unfolded differently had the English government employed a different perspective. We cannot know what might have happened if Elizabeth had encouraged Navarre to convert as early as 1588 and he had taken her advice. My goal is not to appear more insightful in hindsight than the historical figures who were directly involved.¹⁹³ Rather, this example illustrates how English observers, although faced with uncertainty on various levels and with many known unknowns, constructed a relatively coherent picture of the events. This demonstrates, on the one hand, their ability to synthesize diverse information and craft a unified understanding amidst the chaos and ambiguity of their time. On the other hand, it highlights the fact that unambiguity always comes at the expense of complexity, and that the distinction between what is important and what is unimportant depends on the interpretative framework used.

In this case, the neglect of broad Catholic resentment against a Protestant heir and the fundamental trust that Henry III would in principle be willing to grant tolerance towards the 'true faith', which meant that his weakness and hesitation seemed to be the only obstacles to a good outcome, can be interpreted as English Protestant bias. It is at least plausible that the English regime was less unable than unwilling to recognize the broad support for the Catholic cause. Interpreting the League as merely a noble faction led by the Guise, and driven by personal ambition, was surely more comfortable for the self-perception of the Protestant regime than considering and taking seriously the anxieties of a mainly Catholic population. Viewing Philip II as the main opponent who was also pulling the strings in the League, the English government could resort to a familiar enemy. Moreover, it was only reasonable to pay more attention to his plans against England than to actual events in France. We can thus see how this pattern of interpretation met the English government's need to fit new and confusing events into a familiar framework, while at the same time supporting its self-perception.

To underline these biases and blind spots in the English perspective – which did not stem from a lack of information but from a need

¹⁹³ On this methodological pitfall, especially connected with the analysis of unknown unknowns, see Zwierlein, 'Introduction', 26–8.

to bend information in order to fit the established view – it is worth briefly revisiting the comparison with Busbecq’s observations that I alluded to at the beginning. This can only be approximate, because his reports to the imperial court were far more irregular than Stafford’s correspondence, and after 1585 there are wide gaps in the records.¹⁹⁴ Nevertheless, a few points can be emphasized. Like Stafford, Busbecq interpreted the ambitions of the Guises, who knew that they would be excluded from power in the case of Navarre’s succession, as the main motivation behind the League.¹⁹⁵ He also believed that Philip II was pulling the strings in the background¹⁹⁶ and was by no means more sympathetic to the power politics of the Spanish Habsburgs than his English colleague.¹⁹⁷ The dynastic and international dimension therefore played an important role in his reports too.

The decisive difference, however, lies in the central role that Busbecq assigned to the religious motivation of the movement. While he agreed with Stafford that the Guises were primarily driven by power politics, he exempted Charles de Bourbon from this characterization, noting that he ‘is fully convinced that he owes it to the Apostolic See, to the faith he professes, to his family, and to himself, not to allow a Protestant to ascend the throne on the death of the King’.¹⁹⁸ In line with this, he emphasized much more strongly than Stafford the widespread support that the League enjoyed in France:

There is hardly a Catholic nobleman in France who is not suspected of being concerned in the designs of the Guises, and secretly favouring the movement; almost all the provinces are

¹⁹⁴ Of Busbecq’s fifty-eight letters to Rudolf II, twenty-two fall within the period under investigation. They were sent relatively regularly from spring 1584 to spring 1585, then there is a first small gap until November 1585, followed by a large gap until November 1589, after which there are only five more letters until the tradition finally breaks off in 1590.

¹⁹⁵ Busbecq, Letter XLVIII [to Rudolf II, 26 Mar. 1585], in Forster and Daniell, *Life and Letters*, ii. 237–41, at 238.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 239–40.

¹⁹⁷ Busbecq, Letter XLI [to Rudolf II, Paris, 18 Aug. 1584], in Forster and Daniell, *Life and Letters*, ii. 225–7, at 226.

¹⁹⁸ Busbecq, Letter XLIX [to Rudolf II, 25 Apr. 1585], *ibid.* 241–7, at 243.

wavering in their allegiance; of the great cities some are disloyal, while others refuse to receive garrisons from the King . . . And thus, through the length and breadth of the country, numbers are revolting and bidding defiance to the King.¹⁹⁹

For indeed, many French people feared a Protestant king out of apprehension 'that their ancient ritual, services, and sacraments will be profaned and put down by Navarre, and that the Catholics will be in the same position as the Protestants have hitherto been, if indeed they be not in a worse case.'²⁰⁰ This widespread anxiety offered the Guises a favourable opportunity to take the lead, as they were seen as staunch defenders of Catholicism, and many held them in higher esteem than the king himself. As a result, their decision to take up arms in defence of the old faith was widely regarded as fully justified.²⁰¹ In short, Busbecq identified good reasons why it was advisable for Henry III not to decisively oppose the League and support Navarre. However, not only did his assessment of the political landscape differ from Stafford's, but so did his description of Henry III's own motivations. In his reports, the king did not appear well meaning towards Protestantism but misguided and weak-willed; indeed, Busbecq attributed to him no great sympathy towards the Huguenots in general²⁰² and Henry of Navarre in particular. Unlike Stafford, he believed that the king hated Navarre even more than he despised the Guises.²⁰³

The picture the emperor's envoy painted of the situation in France thus diverged significantly from that of the English diplomats. He took the widespread rejection of Protestantism much more seriously, thereby obtaining a more complex view of the conflict and especially of Henry III's situation. To be sure, the English observers grasped these points from time to time too, but, especially in situations of growing

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. 242. See also the statement of broad support for the League already sent in Busbecq, Letter XLII [to Rudolf II, 4 Oct. 1584], in Forster and Daniell, *Life and Letters*, ii. 227–9, at 228.

²⁰⁰ Busbecq, Letter XLVIII [to Rudolf II, 26 Mar. 1585], *ibid.* 237–241, at 238.

²⁰¹ Ibid. 238–9.

²⁰² Busbecq, Letter XLV [to Rudolf II, 25 Jan. 1585], in Forster and Daniell, *Life and Letters*, ii. 231–3, at 232.

²⁰³ Busbecq, Letter XLVIII [to Rudolf II, 26 Mar. 1585], *ibid.* 237–41, at 240.

tension and confusion, their established narrative gave them a form of recourse: it enabled them to handle uncertainty by minimizing complexity and falling back on the familiar. All this allowed them to remain capable of acting – but sometimes also meant that they missed decisive aspects and developments.

SIBYLLE RÖTH researches and teaches early modern history at the University of Konstanz. In her current project, she is investigating the self-portrayal, international reception, and historiography of the French Holy League. In 2018, she completed her PhD on ideas of equality and inequality in the German late Enlightenment, entitled *Grenzen der Gleichheit: Forderungen nach Gleichheit und die Legitimation von Ungleichheit in Zeitschriften der deutschen Spätaufklärung* (2022).