

HUGUENOTS were a group of Protestants who became the centre of political and religious quarrels in France in the 1500s and 1600s. The Huguenots believed the teaching of the reformer John Calvin and were members of the Reformed Church. The French Roman Catholics gave them the name Huguenots. The name may have come from that of Besançon Hugues, a Swiss religious leader.

During the reign of Henry II (1547-1559), the Huguenots became strong in number and influence in France. The Roman Catholic government persecuted them. Under Francis II, the Huguenots became important politically. Louis I de Bourbon de Condé (1530-1569) and Admiral Coligny were Huguenots. The Guise family, which was politically at the head of the Roman Catholics, influenced King Francis against the Huguenots.

The Massacre. After Francis II died and Charles IX became king, the queen mother, Catherine de Médicis, controlled France. For a time, she encouraged the Huguenots as a balance against the Guises. But feelings in both parties became so bitter that civil war broke out. Catherine allied herself with the Duke of Guise. They encouraged the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day, which took place on Aug. 24, 1572. In this massacre, many Huguenots in Paris and other French towns were murdered.

The Guise family fell from favour during the reign of King Henry III. Henry feared the popularity of the Guise family and had the Duke of Guise and his brother, a cardinal, assassinated. These murders aroused public feeling against Henry III, and he allied himself with Henry of Navarre and the Huguenots. But he too was assassinated, and Henry of Navarre became king of France as Henry IV.

Most of France was Roman Catholic, and Henry IV decided that he must become a Roman Catholic to be successful as king. But he opposed the persecution of the Huguenots and, in 1598, issued the Edict of Nantes. This law gave the Huguenots freedom of worship in about 75 towns and cities. The edict also gave them complete political freedom.

Flight from France. The Huguenots lost their political freedom during the reign of Louis XIII. His minister, Cardinal Richelieu, conquered their cities. Their main fortress, La Rochelle, was captured in 1628. But they were still allowed freedom of worship. They did not lose this freedom until 1685, when Louis XIV repealed the Edict of Nantes. Thousands of Huguenots fled from France to new homes in England, Germany, Ireland, The Netherlands, and North America.

Some of the laws against the Huguenots were relaxed shortly before the French Revolution began in 1789. But the Huguenots did not receive religious and political freedom until the Constituent Assembly (1789-1791) gave them full rights.

REFERENCE – THE WORLD BOOK ENCYCLOPEDIA