

Introduction to Part III

In the history of any country there are portentous dates – dates heavy with significance for the future. In the history of France, 1559 is one such. April saw the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis demobilise the warrior nobility after 40 years of active service abroad. And July saw the death of Henri II, the linchpin of the chariot of State.

A gash was opened in the French body politic through which burst out all the accumulated tensions, conflicts and frustrations which François I and his son, aided by largely favourable circumstances, had just about held in check. The economy of Europe was already in trouble, and as the century wore on it sank into crisis, exacerbating social tensions in town and country alike. A population on whose growth ‘mortality’ was the only effective check was beset by the calamities of famine, plague and war, which exacerbated each other in a vicious spiral of disaster. In the 1580s, war became the dominant player in the scenario. Men sought both compensation and scapegoats for their misfortunes, called authority itself into question, and strove to exorcise their accursed fate through cathartic violence. The new religion now being professed within the land acted partly as a vehicle for the expression of the complicated underlying discontents, and partly as a catalyst for violent social and political reactions.