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The Huguenot Diaspora

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Diaspora 2:2 1992 The Huguenot Diaspora John Fletcher University of East Anglia Diasporas are often set in motion by an act of persecution, massacre, or other violent action on the part of the majority against a minority. The persecuted minority is then dispersed; more often than not, it includes the elite responsible for much of the commercial and cultural activity of the persecuting nation and goes on to enrich the cultural and commercial life of the new host country. Moreover, in addition to the undoubted short- and medium-term damage in terms of loss of commercial and cultural effectiveness, history frequently exacts long-term revenge as well, so that, both sooner and later, the persecutors are punished for their act of intolerance. The reverse is hardly if ever true, that is, that the new hosts regret the generosity of their welcome: far from subverting the culture of the new homeland—the allegation habitually proffered in the former country to justify the initial persecution—the refugees contribute valuably to it. Thus, the irrational paranoia at the root of hatred of minorities carries its own baleful punishment. The diaspora of the Protestants of France—known as Huguenots—is a case in point. It constituted, without doubt, the destruction of an elite. It can plausibly be

argued that it was a factor in the French loss of Canada. And there is no missing the irony of the fact that the military governor of the Atlantic stronghold of Brest during the last world war, a notoriously ungentle Wehrmacht officer, was a man of Huguenot descent. In 1985, 300 years after it happened, President Mitterrand apologized on behalf of the French people for Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes, a decision that intensified the persecution of the country's Protestants and precipitated one of the largest forced migrations of modern times. The Edict of Nantes (1598) had ended a long period of religious strife in France, but it left the Protestant minority in an entrenched position, which became increasingly irksome to the Catholic absolute monarchy. Accordingly, in 1685, less than a century after its promulgation, the Edict was simply annulled by royal diktat. Stripped of their legal protection and civil rights, the Huguenots were harassed by the military until they agreed to take the sacraments of their ruler's church or until, tormented beyond endurance, they fled the country. Such gestures as Mitterrand's apology, which was accompanied by the issue of a commemorative postage stamp with the motto "Tolerance, Pluralism, Brotherhood," are not empty. Chancellor Kohl has similarly expressed sorrow for what his country did in Crete during the last war. His predecessor, Willy Brandt, famously knelt in contrition at the site of the Warsaw ghetto. The British and French governments have formally repudiated the Munich agreement, declaring it null and void. One could multiply the examples. In every case the practical effect was nil, but the symbolic importance was considerable. Likewise, it is perfectly reasonable for the Asian countries to insist, before they are prepared to turn the page, on a public expression of regret from the Japanese for their aggression of 50 years ago. Solemn declarations acknowledging past errors close a chapter, set the record straight, and indicate a decisive, if belated, acceptance of the reality of the historical record and a willingness to come to terms with it. So, three centuries after the event, France made amends for the persecution of the Huguenots. Joseph Fouché's famously cynical dictum "Worse than a crime: a blunder" has been applied to various forms of state wickedness, but it fits with particular aptness the treatment that Louis XIV meted out to his Protestant subjects. Until he betrayed their trust, they were intensely loyal to him; their bitterness at what they saw as unprovoked rejection made them formidable enemies when they volunteered for service in the foreign armies ranged in alliance against him. Moreover, they were industrious people who were skilled at making things, especially value added luxury goods, which France exported and which the world was eager to pay good specie for; after their expulsion they enriched other countries instead. In one stroke France lost much of her business and manufacturing elite and stored...

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