Experiencing Exile: Huguenot Refugees in the Dutch Republic, 1680–1700

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The history of the Huguenot diaspora following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes has been widely chronicled. First, exiled Huguenots wrote narratives of their escape in order to preserve the memory of their hardship – no doubt at the prompting of numerous individuals eager to hear their compelling stories. Second, around the 200th anniversary of the Revocation, historians began to retell these exile narratives in order to reinsert the Huguenot narrative into French historical consciousness. Finally, historians of the late 20th century reexamined the migration of the Huguenots, stressing the cosmopolitan and international character of the émigrés. Each wave of publication has regrettably, and most likely unconsciously, ignored the everyday experiences and struggles of immigrants upon arrival. In other words, historians have largely overlooked the experience of individuals after migration in favor of examining the fascinating journeys into exile. When they looked into the lives of Huguenot immigrants, it was often to extol the cultural contributions of the elite class of émigrés rather than common people. For approximately 150,000 individuals, the escape from France was merely one side of a complicated story. These individuals left their home country, occupations, and families to live in new environments. Naturally, life for many Huguenots was fraught with familial, financial, and spiritual distress.

David van der Linden of the University of Cambridge has sought to tell the story of this latter class of people in his work, *Experiencing Exile: Huguenot Refugees in the Dutch Republic, 1680-1700*. This book focuses on 'the complexity of the Huguenot exile experience' in order to mitigate the troubling historiographical past
that often ignores many of the experiences of the émigrés (p. 2). Van der Linden hopes to avoid writing ‘hagiographies’ of the Huguenots, as did his predecessors, and to highlight the ‘lived experience of the refugees themselves’ (pp. 6, 8). This book is the fruit of van der Linden’s PhD dissertation at Utrecht University, and the author intends to give a unique and needed perspective of what life was like for Huguenots while in exile (p. xv). Though England, Switzerland, and Germany were all popular destinations for escape from the dragonnades in France, van der Linden focuses on the estimated 35,000 French émigrés who eventually settle in the Dutch Republic.(1) By examining the Huguenot refugees in their Dutch context, the author purposes to ‘reinsert the vast masses of refugees into the history of exile’ rather than ‘covering the process of integration or the fortunes of elite Huguenots’ (p. 8). Therefore, van der Linden argues a somewhat original thesis; he suggests ‘that the Huguenot exiles who suffered gloriously for their beliefs were few and far between’ (p. 2). Moreover, he argues that the Huguenots, ‘were people who struggled to make ends meet on unfamiliar territory … who created a triumphant vision of the Huguenot … and who even returned to France when the hardships of exile had utterly destroyed their hopes for a better future’ (p. 2).

In order to validate his thesis, van der Linden surveys a wide base of primary manuscripts and secondary literature. He seeks to ‘merge’ two often-separated sets of sources. The author analyzes the ‘subjective experience’ of the Huguenots through personal journals, correspondence, and sermons in order to grasp the real life experience of his subjects (p. 10). Additionally, van der Linden reflects on more traditional ‘quantitative evidence’ such as governmental registers and economic data (p. 10). Van der Linden helpfully outlines the archives he references most frequently, mainly pulling from Walloon church consistories, national archives of France and the Netherlands, the British library, and several important university libraries (p. xvii). His secondary sources are mostly related to migration, cultural identity and memory, and Huguenot history in general. Curiously silent in his account are sources related to print and news culture during this time – an important idea relating to form and function of printed material of all genres. Nevertheless, van der Linden impressively plumbs both primary and secondary sources to make his argument.

Van der Linden organizes his text into three parts. The first, titled ‘Leaving France’, describes the socioeconomic circumstances of Huguenot immigrants. In short, this section suggests, ‘socioeconomic opportunities eventually determined who was able to go into exile’ (p. 15). Consequently, most Huguenots who escaped France simply fit in along the margins of society in their new land rather than excelled as previously thought (p. 69). Chapter one uses source material from Dieppe and Rotterdam in order to trace a popular escape route for refugees. This chapter functions as a quantitative analysis of which immigrants left, and it also attempts to ascertain why they did so. Through this analysis, van der Linden claims, ‘Huguenots in some professions left disproportionately to their share in the overall Protestant economy of Dieppe’ (p. 29). The author’s most novel contribution in this chapter is his discussion of ‘information networks’ that ‘clearly played a role’ in migration communication (p. 37). Although he does not develop this idea significantly, it is intriguing nonetheless. Otherwise, van der Linden seems in this chapter to rehash the approaches of other historians. Even though his method is not as novel as his introduction promises, van der Linden’s findings are still important in refashioning the Huguenots into typical migrants rather than triumphantly successful refugees.

Fittingly, chapter two continues to examine the plight of the Huguenot migrants as examples of the difficulties of migration in early modern Europe. The author does this by evaluating data concerning the textile and book making trades as well as the market for refugee ministers in the Dutch Republic. Van der Linden implicitly aligns with the ‘revisionist’ strain of historians, and he demonstrates convincingly, through a host of quantitative data, that the Huguenots were not a boon to the economy of the nations they migrated to but rather individuals who struggled to fit in (p. 41). Even more surprising are van der Linden’s revelations regarding Huguenot poverty; he ably demonstrates that ‘the extent of Huguenot poverty was much larger’ in the Dutch Republic than even revisionist scholarship has demonstrated to this point (p. 71).

Part two of this text treats the religious experiences of the émigrés. Van der Linden hopes to give an all-encompassing perspective of what migration to the Dutch Republic was like for all Huguenots. In the three chapters of this section, the author shows the perspective of the Huguenot ministers, the congregations in
exile, and those Huguenots who were so disillusioned that they returned to France. Chapter three discusses the preaching ministry of the refugee ministers. Specifically, van der Linden argues that refugee sermons are best understood ‘from the perspective of both ministers and their audience’ (p. 82). The author essentially argues that most Huguenots struggled with assurance. Therefore, Huguenot exile preachers tried to reassure their parishioners and ‘make the refugees feel proud of their accomplishments … rather than dismayed’ (p. 82). This chapter scans more than 300 sermons preached in the Dutch Republic. These sermons sought to reassure the audiences and explain the revocation through a hearty doctrine of providence (p. 91). Furthermore, the sermons were paradigmatic of the overall message of refugee preaching, and their focus on providence served to build the dignity of distraught refugees. In the author’s words, preaching on providence was akin to the action of ‘holding up a mirror to the refugees in order to convince them that the exile had been the right decision, and to give them a new sense of purpose as God’s chosen people’ (p. 96).

Chapter four discusses more specifically the style and content of Huguenot preaching in the Dutch Republic. Van der Linden argues that the émigrés preferred more practical sermons that contained ‘moral’ teachings rather than exegesis (p. 129). These practical sermons were usually filled with condemnation towards Huguenots who stayed in France and feigned conversions to Catholicism. However, the author helpfully notes that after some time, even the most polarizing and strident critics of the nouveaux convertis – Pierre Jurieu – softened his rhetoric and looked to encourage those persecuted in France back to their Protestant faith (p. 126). The author also claims to deal with the difficult issue of sermon reception in this chapter, both as texts and audible sermons. Ultimately, van der Linden presents more of a homiletical analysis than a reception history by tracing the methodology and practices of several preachers and preaching manuals rather than spending time analyzing responses to these sermons. The author appreciates the difficulty of reconstructing audience response, but nevertheless makes the sweeping statement: ‘sermons that used Protestant theology as a source of comfort were far more popular than sermons that were limited to scriptural exegesis’ (p. 108). Furthermore van der Linden notes that Huguenot refugees had a preference for sermons that provided practical application points from biblical texts. His best example describes the amateur sermon critic Pieter Teding van Berkhout’s enthusiasm for sermons that provide ‘useful answers rather than abstract theology’ (pp. 118–9). The main problem with van der Linden’s assertion is the assumption that exegetical sermons cannot be practical. In short, he sets up a false dichotomy for categorizing refugee sermons; these sermons are either exegetical or moral/practical. Can they not be both? Regardless, van der Linden’s introduction to refugee preaching in its methods and presentation is helpful in understanding the type of sermons preachers delivered and those styles that seemed to be more prevalent.

This section of the book concludes with chapter five, an explanation of the anxieties Huguenots faced when reflecting on their homeland. More precisely, van der Linden argues here that ‘the hopes for a restoration of Protestant worship and the willingness to go home ran much deeper within the refugee community than has previously been assumed’ (p. 132). The author shows how the content of sermons and the Huguenot reflections on political events demonstrated their underlying desire to return to France. This perspective can be seen most notably in Dutch Huguenot’s fervent enthusiasm for William III’s seemingly unstoppable military and political success (p. 136). According to van der Linden, the Huguenots viewed William as a synecdoche for Protestantism as a whole; the expectation was that William’s army would usher in victories against the Catholic forces of France and subsequently provide concessions for Huguenot subjects in France (p. 136). In this way, van der Linden engages in a political history of the exile. Notably, he traces the way Louis XIV leveraged claims to inheritance in order to coax Protestants to abjure their faith and return to France. For instance, van der Linden includes the example of Susanna Jacobs who was in line to receive the inheritance of a home and a brewery in France (p. 143). Jacob’s willingness to abjure her faith to receive her inheritance aptly demonstrates van der Linden’s assertion that attachment to the homeland, hope for restoring property, and a belief in future restoration of Protestant privileges were strong motivating factors in the life of Dutch Huguenots. Van der Linden also includes a well-researched breakdown of which professions were more likely to return to France; ultimately, van der Linden suggests that the difficulty of making ‘ends meet’ and the tempting offer of free travel costs motivated eventual returns (pp. 148–50).

In part three of his book, the culmination of his research, van der Linden determines to explore the
‘historical consciousness of Huguenot refugees’ and their reflections upon their experiences as religious refugees (p. 12). Chapter six investigates eight detailed memoirs of refugee Huguenots in order to see how these individuals, serving as representatives of the group as a whole, remembered their past experiences. Remarkably, the authors of these accounts refrain from commenting on their life while in the Dutch Republic. The accounts also contain interesting reflections upon the émigrés’ relationship with Catholic neighbors and associates back in France. Some Huguenots attempting escape were shown compassion by merciful Catholics, and in some cases, Catholics even tended to the valued property of their Protestant neighbors (p. 166). Nevertheless, the Protestant authors still referred to their cross-confessional helpers as ‘friends from hell’ (p. 176). With these narratives in mind, van der Linden hopes to explore deeper questions than most historians. The author is not concerned with validating the accuracy of the contents of the narratives but with the question of ‘why refugees remembered the past in such conflicting ways’ (p. 164). In other words, he attempts to delineate the process of constructing and passing on collective memory. Van der Linden suggests that the Huguenot authors had ‘specific audiences in mind’ in their writing and that they used certain ‘mnemonic schemata’ to construct their accounts. His theory on how the Huguenots constructed collective memory, borrowed from a construct developed more fully by Peter Burke, incorporates the common narrative elements of providence and biblical typology. Van der Linden’s skill as a historian shines in this chapter; he adroitly traces the eight narratives, navigates through memory theories, and convincingly demonstrates that the common schema of the time influenced the Huguenot’s memory of their exile.

Finally, van der Linden concludes part three of his book with a sweeping summary of two significant Huguenot histories: Pierre Jurieu’s *Lettres pastorales* and Elie Benoist’s *Historie de l’Edit de Nantes*. The author argues that these two volumes serve as an accurate depiction of collective memory and identity among the Huguenot refugees. Furthermore, van der Linden identifies both Jurieu and Benoist as ‘memory brokers’ – individuals that gather and form the basis for a groups’ collective memory (p. 179). In this case, both of these men contribute to the greater narrative of Protestant suffering, martyrrology, and injustice. Van der Linden rightly describes Jurieu’s work as imprecatory towards French Catholic historians and their slights against the Huguenots. Jurieu’s narrative encapsulates the suffering and death encountered by many Huguenots in France (pp. 183, 186). Interestingly, van der Linden notes that Jurieu called for ‘papers’ or letters from those who have been persecuted so that he could include them in his narrative. Additionally, van der Linden notes that there is a clear redaction process at work in Jurieu’s writing (pp. 188, 193). Though similar in aim, Benoist’s project was much wider in scope; his volume included over 3000 pages of text and meant to respond to Catholic slights on the Protestants as well as to provide pedagogical examples for the Huguenots in the Dutch Republic to follow (pp. 196, 208). Van der Linden’s interpretation on these histories includes a history of their reception and use among French refugees in the Low Countries. Chapter seven is an altogether helpful case study of Huguenot refugee memory in a Dutch context.

In his conclusion, van der Linden points to further areas of research; he notes that efforts should be made to compare the ‘fates and fortunes’ of the Huguenots in the Dutch Republic with other popular places of refuge (p. 228). Ultimately, the author redefines exile as ‘a thoroughly unsettling experience, not a clear-cut quest for religious freedom’ (p. 230). However, the question remains: does van der Linden effectively argue that the Huguenots in the Dutch Republic did not especially suffer gloriously for their beliefs, but were more or less regular émigrés that struggled to make ends meet? In other words, does the author prove that most Huguenots were not persecuted Protestant zealots but average immigrants? Van der Linden’s use of quantitative data in part one certainly provides a strong line of argument. It seems that, like most other immigrants, the Huguenots in the Low Countries relied on poverty assistance quite regularly. They also faced fierce competition in their trades. Part two provides a helpful understanding of the religious experience of Huguenot émigrés by successfully chronicling the spiritual battle, and the religiously charged perspective on European warfare and politics. However, van der Linden fails to adequately contrast the everyday spiritual struggles he describes with the more grandiose visions of persecution that most scholars ascribed unilaterally to the Huguenot refugees.

Part three contains similar problems; the author identifies Jurieu and Benoist as memory brokers who shaped
the identity of the Huguenots in the Dutch Republic. The pastors did this through reinterpreting exile history into persecution narratives, argues van der Linden. This seems to counter van der Linden’s earlier assertions that the Huguenots were relatively standard immigrants. If they were, does not their collective consciousness of being a persecuted minority make them exceptional? Is it possible for émigrés to be at one time altogether normal while thinking themselves something else? If so, van der Linden does not fully address this question. If not, then the author could have addressed this dilemma with a bit more clarity. In summary, van der Linden effectively demonstrates that the Huguenot exiles in the Dutch Republic were certainly not suffering martyrs who became altogether successful in their new lands. The question still remains as to who exactly the Huguenots were – a question that cannot be fully resolved from present sources.

Nonetheless, Experiencing Exile provides an excellent look into ‘the complexity of the Huguenot experience’ (p. 2). The author’s work responsibly handles countless sources with the thoroughness that many previous scholars have lacked, and for this, he should be praised. Van der Linden’s brilliant historiographical introduction is a testament to his willingness to reread and reevaluate traditional sources en route to new interpretations. In well-written prose, van der Linden retells the stories of many relocated Huguenots and incorporates related fields of history into his work such as the history of memory, audience reception, and migration history. Van der Linden should surely be praised for a valuable contribution to Huguenot history and early modern history in general.

Notes


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