Lead: The creeping revocation of the Edict of Nantes which withdrew religious freedom from French Huguenots was one of history’s most egregious acts of religious intolerance prior to the Holocaust.

Intro.: A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts.

Content: In 1598, after several attempts at reaching a settlement between French Protestants, known as Huguenots, and Catholics, King Henry IV issued the Edict of Nantes. He had been a Huguenot, but converted to Catholicism in order to become the first of France’s Bourbon dynasty. He wanted to achieve some kind of accommodation among his unruly and religiously passionate subjects and after four years of negotiation, issued the great Edict.

While Protestants received some recognition, certain civil rights, judicial protections, relief from active persecution and limited freedom of worship, on balance, the Edict of Nantes was a compromise document, clearly temporary in its intent, and ended up benefitting Catholics far more than Protestants. For instance, Catholics could worship anywhere in France even in places where the Huguenots were clearly in the majority, but the Protestants were restricted to certain regions. Protestants were allowed to garrison a number of cities and store arms lest the religious wars break out again, but this represented a state
within a state and a permanent threat to the sovereignty of the King and clearly could not be allowed to stand.

Henry was assassinated in 1610, and though the Edict was temporarily renewed by his successors, it was under almost constant pressure from royalists and Catholics. As each decade passed, first Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu, then ultimately Louis XIV, sought to diminish its protections. In 1685, finally, the Sun-King, Louis XIV, revoked the Edict in an act of vicious, brutal intolerance. He declared their so-called heresy to be non-existent in France, closed Huguenot houses of worship, force-baptized Huguenot children, persecuted, imprisoned, exiled, or executed Huguenots who did not convert or come to heel.

The Edict of Nantes was not religious toleration. At best, it provided relief for the Huguenots and was an early radical attempt to allow two religions to officially, but temporarily, exist side-by-side in a single state. It tried to create space between warring factions and bring peace. It ultimately failed. Its violent revocation drained France of some of its most industrious and loyal subjects. In fleeing, they took their talent and enterprise to the benefit of Switzerland, Protestant Germany, England and North America. In America, as victims of religious intolerance they provided a vivid reminder in the 1780s to the Founders of the United States of the need for the separation of church and state.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.
Resources

Champeaud, Gregory. *The Edict of Poitiers and the Treaty of Nerac, or Two Steps towards the Edict of Nantes.*  


*Modern History Sourcebook: Revocation of the Edict of Nantes October 22, 1685.*  
Internet Modern History Sourcebook.


Copyright 2016 by Dan Roberts Enterprises, Inc.