

ALSACE AND THE FRANCO-GERMAN QUESTION

by Marc Gafarot*

When in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian conflict an old teacher lamented to his pupils that French would no longer be the language of instruction at school level, perhaps he never pictured another teacher, a German, doing just the same some centuries earlier, mourning the fate of German in that territory.

The history of both cultures is one of unfair concurrence rather than of generous overlapping. If today the situation has changed it is due to the dramatic penalties inflicted on Germany following the Second World War. It is a fact that Alsatians have become more culturally French since the end of this conflict than they had ever been in the past. However one cannot assert that French has been totally unfamiliar in these lands. The Oaths of Strasbourg written in 842 are considered the first written text in the Old French language and involved a set of documents of mutual pledges of allegiance between the sons of Louis the Pious. The Marseillaise was also first sung in that city. Ever since, Germany and France have kept an eye on a piece of land that both countries have reasons to claim as their own.

Needless to say France, both as a country and a civilization, has never found any moral impediment to glossing over her country's non-French speaking cultural heritage. "*Soyez propres, parlez en français*". This old motto has inspired several generations of French and does not seem likely to change. Until a short time ago it was believed that the Germanic element had to be extirpated. French politicians,

across the whole political spectrum, pursued this policy to the very end.

This region that has been at the crossroads of Europe since Roman times has witnessed the way big powers traditionally deal with diversity. On both sides Alsatians have been described as truly French or German while simultaneously being regarded with suspicion. Colonel Dreyfuss was perceived by many nationals of both nations as a man of double allegiance by being both a Jew and an Alsatian. The Alsatian question was solved to a great extent with the conclusion of the Second World War. Politically Germany had to abandon any attempt to re-take this territory and linguistically the German language, and its Alsatian variant, had to be neglected. To a great extent the French can rightly claim victory.

The Alsace region's unique history has created an area in which the majority of its inhabitants tend to identify themselves more with Alsace than with France. Regionalism here is stronger than elsewhere in France. Also the vernacular language is here more present than other regions of the hexagon with their own language. This region has at one time been Germanic in language



and culture but with enclaves of French linguistic dominance. In this respect it resembles Flanders, which was also once part of the Carolingian Empire. In 870 A.D. the empire of Charles the Great was divided amongst his three children under the Treaty of Mersen. In the not-too-distant past for the German Empire, (re)gaining control of the lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine was an event of momentous political and symbolic significance. The euphoria that followed the Great War's conclusion and Alsace-Lorraine's return to France, however, was short-lived. The recovery of the border provinces involved far more than the reacquisition of lost territory, and the reimposition of French rule proved far more difficult than popular opinion and the politicians had expected, influenced as they were by a massive and ever-present nationalistic literature on the region. French officials and the military arrived with an ethnic vision of the borderland. In an attempt to re-direct Alsatian and Lorraine identity, a cleansing policy was initiated to find good and bad Alsatians. Between 1918 and 1920 the French thus undertook massive purges of Alsatian and Lorrainer society and reinstated French in schools for a generation instructed completely in Ger-

man. Traditionally, from a French perspective integrating this territory with the rest of France has meant getting rid of their German characteristics. Right up to the present day, accommodation has not been a common practice. The Germans, for their part, were no better in their dealings with French-speakers.

Article 1 of the Peace Treaty between France and the new German Empire stipulated the cession of the two provinces. Bitter protests were held against the new tenant as illustrated by a massive vote against German domination. In contrast to other states of the German federation, Alsace was directly ruled by the imperial government.

Bismarck himself was aware that from the viewpoint of nationality, the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine would be a source of weakness and instability for Germany. Nevertheless, when he demanded the transfer of Alsace-Lorraine to the German Empire, it was not on the grounds of ethnicity, language or culture (which he treated as beneath contempt). Rather, Bismarck's view was influenced by strategic and geopolitical considerations, the conviction that the new Germany had to be adequately guarded from the West against the reemergence

of French aggression, and by the desire to obtain popular support for Prussia inside Germany. In this, amongst other things, the Iron Chancellor had very little in common with Hitler. On the question of justification, he appears to have been pleased to regard the annexation as an acquisition by right of conquest, justified by the consideration that France was a nation with a record of constant aggression and this implied a need to extend the frontier.

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For the first time the method of annexation by simple transfer was anachronistic. It was the old method, which had appeared normal and natural at the Congress of Vienna. A century earlier the transfer of the population to a victorious sovereign was no longer the norm. In the nineteenth century, with its growing belief in national self-determination and plebiscitary voting, such a path undertaken in defiance of the wishes of the population was losing favour with the political mainstream. A serious dispute over Germany's legal right, as conqueror, to impose her will on a defeated France, did not arise. The acquisition of Alsace-Lorraine by the German Empire in 1871 was legally valid. Between 1871 and 1914 Alsace-Lorraine became known in political discourse, in schools and in the popular imagination as the 'lost provinces' or the 'twin sisters' without which the nation could not be whole. This region became the sentimental homeland of French nationalism. Alsatian towns were considered quintessential to French identity. It cannot be overlooked that in the period from 1870 to 1914, while Alsace was part of the German Reich, the new Republican authorities tailored

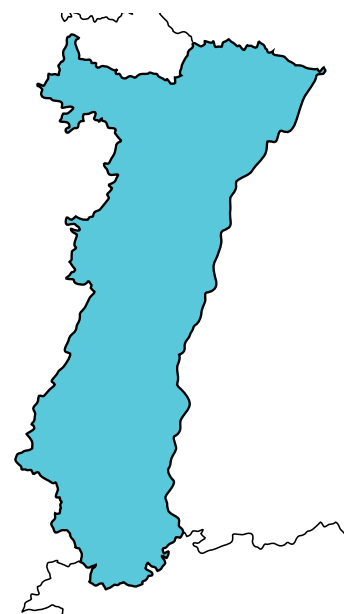
the new French nationalism and French identity to the values of the new Republic. Even for those who felt completely French it was not a pleasant surprise once the Germans were out and the new French administration subsequently in. The privileges obtained from Germany like the maintenance of the Napoleonic Concordat (still in place today) and an embryonic welfare state, were elements antagonistic to the values of post-war France. The French imagery depicted 'the lost provinces' as the twin sisters in sorrow. This was highly debatable since most Alsatians adapted to German rule and discontent only emerged when the natives learnt about their second-class status compared to other German territories, and her direct dependency on Prussia. The (re)emergence of an autonomist movement proved that the Alsatian question was far from being solved even under the Germans. In 1870, in the words of a French historian, Alsace might well be German by race, but it was French by choice. The Germans may well differ on that view. As for the Alsatians themselves? No one bothered to ask the locals.

During wartime on the German side there was an inclination towards a suspicion of Alsatian and Lorreiners' loyalty to fight on their side. This attitude would find its counterpart after the conflict was over and many Alsatians were sent to concentration camps by their French 'liberators'. During this period the Alsatian movement was somehow criminalized as was the Flemish movement within Belgium by their Walloon counterparts. These attitudes continued well into the post-war years and reappeared during and after the Second World War. As for France, it was simple to deliver identity cards of good and bad Alsatians and Lorreiners, thereby completely disrupting both societies. More than 110,000 Germans living in Alsace crossed the Rhine back into Germany

between late 1918 and late 1920. Political dissent did not go unpunished and many socialists and nationalists had to flee the country, such as those that proclaimed the 11 day Independent Republic of Alsace-Lorraine in 1918. The outcome of the war was one of breaking the unity of society and as a result the autonomist movement suffered significant losses. From 1871 to 1918, French paneregists made a case for the liberation of the 'sorrow sisters', particularly during the war years. They did so by portraying a completely bogus view of reality, in order that the myth be restored, at any price. The state classified individuals into four categories, A, B, C or D, depending on their birthplace, the birthplace of their parents, and sometimes that of their grandparents. It often took on ridiculous proportions, since some of the region's staunchest Francophiles had German blood and were, consequently, classified as second rate. By labelling people according to their ethnicity, the French provoked profound divisions within Alsatian and Lorrainer society, and helped worsen the social cement that kept communities together. The state's objective was to strengthen its authority and create multiple categories of Alsatians and Lorrainers with different rights. This recriminatory climate left profound scars amongst the population and led to a climate of fear and bitterness. The Alsatians were taught not to cherish their cultural heritage. And many did just that.

During the Second World War, Alsatians were drafted into the Wermacht

as they were seen as part of the German nation. It was thus the turn of the Germans, as the new rulers, to once more categorize good and bad Alsatians. The immediate post-war era marked a time in which Alsatians no longer liked themselves. The old ghosts were haunting again. Alsatians had to cope with the growing suspicion of French people who assumed they had collaborated with the German invaders. After 1945, Alsatians learnt to relinquish their traditions and customs of German origin. Only a few artists and some old and loyal autonomists lamented this situation. After WWII Alsatian identity, Catholic faith, and the German language for the first time ceased to be seen as synonymous in the public pronouncements of religious leaders. Once more, a linguistic policy intended to cleanse German was ruthlessly implemented. The French also conquered the ultimate resort of the German language. The Concordate with the Holy See and a more generous welfare state were the only reminders of those years. Once again Alsatians were told to dislike themselves and opt out for the language of the former invader. Then came the European Community a true success story for the economy and the peace of the continent. Nonetheless, the diversity and plurality of stateless nations, despite official propaganda, have always failed to be on the agenda. Or as Shakespeare might have put it, '*much ado about nothing*'.



Alsace: between France and Germany

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