

STERN PRIZE

ALSACE TO THE ALSATIANS? VISIONS AND DIVISIONS OF ALSATIAN REGIONALISM, 1890–1930

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My project explores the evolution and divisions of Alsatian regionalism. I originally came to this subject interested in how Alsations sought to shape their regional culture against the nationalizing demands of the Germans, and later, the French. Too often the tale of the Alsations had been told—told well but in narrow terms—by concentrating either on specific developments in Alsace or on one side of the 1918 divide.¹ In this way, earlier studies captured essential elements of the Alsatian situation, but did not trace the broader, complex evolution of the idea of region across the First World War.

The work of scholars such as Celia Applegate, Alon Confino, Carolyn Ford, and Anne-Marie Thiesse further inspired me to explore the nature of Alsatian regionalism. Their respective investigations of the relationship between nation and region demonstrated that the “imagined” nation was realized in its local roots. Regional identity, in this rendition served to integrate the locality into the larger national community.² Yet in Alsace, regionalism had often been used to balk the process of nationalization. Therefore, I was led to ask, what was the nature of regionalism in a borderland such as Alsace?

As I began to delve into the case of Alsace, it quickly became apparent that while Alsations may have resisted the heavy-handed German and French attempts to win their allegiance, there existed equally fierce debates among the Alsations about what it meant to be Alsatian. Indeed, some Alsations putatively ranked as allies against the Germans fought bitterly over issues of regional belonging and political orientation.³ Various Alsations used regionalism to maintain the French legacy in the region, to defend Alsatian interests within the German Empire, or to integrate the region into the cultural and political life of the *Kaiserreich*. Despite such divisions—which naturally colored attitudes toward France

after the First World War—certain commonalities existed, above all the claim of all interested parties to represent the idea of “Alsace to the Alsatians.” A second question therefore appeared: How did internal divides among Alsatians—religious, social, political, and national—affect the nature of Alsatian regionalism?

To address these questions, I took a threefold approach. First, I explored how poets, writers, amateur scholars, and intellectuals sought to define the customs, traditions, and history of Alsace. Given the political limitations on Alsatians in the *Kaiserreich*, cultural battles over history, memory, custom, and language often became stand-ins for political action. But politics too had a role here, as Alsatians used those parliamentary tools at their disposal to push their regional agenda. Finally, I examined how Alsatians recast their identity by investigating the links between culture and politics, especially in light of the fact that artists often became involved in politics, and politicians pontificated on aesthetic matters of political importance. Woven throughout these three lines of inquiry was a further question: How did the First World War and the return of French sovereignty to the area transform Alsatian regionalism? Festivals, literary journals, monuments, children’s books, the political press, and Landtag records collectively demonstrated how Alsatians employed regionalism to protect their cultural heritage, defend their regional traditions, and fight for greater political rights, both under German rule before 1918 and under French control after the First World War.

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Although Alsatians had been aware of their peculiar status under French rule as well as in the first decades of German control after 1871, the closing decade of the nineteenth century witnessed a blossoming of regional culture.⁴ As in many other localities in Europe, local artists, writers, historians, poets, and painters mined the customs, traditions, history, landscape, and local German dialect to evoke and articulate specific visions of the region.⁵ Leading members of this cultural renaissance espoused the notion of an Alsatian “dual culture”, a *mélange* of the best of German and French cultural worlds. This stress on the cultural uniqueness of Alsace found its greatest proponents among the editors and writers of the *Revue alsacienne illustrée*. The Francophile editors of the journal hoped that the invocation of a unique regional culture within the context of a federalized German Empire would stress the French elements that constituted a part of Alsace’s special cultural heritage.⁶

Such conceptions resonated with much of the local populace. However, some Alsatians adopted the argument of Alsatian uniqueness to promote more politically neutral aspects of the regional culture. The play-

wright and poet Gustave Stoskopf, for example, founded a dialect theater in which local actors used the regional patois to poke fun at French and especially German nationalists, as well as Alsatians who sought to profit from the region's difficulties. In contrast, some Germans in the area, often in conjunction with local writers, sought to use local traditions to prove the "Germanness" of Alsace.⁷ In particular, the contributors to the Vogesenverein's (a hiking association) *Jahrbuch für Geschichte, Sprache, und Literatur* consisted almost entirely of Germans from across the Rhine who pursued this German agenda. Finally, some Alsatians took the idea of a unique regional culture in the opposite direction, using regionalism as a means to promote a pronounced pro-French version of Alsatian history and culture.⁸ Such disagreements gave rise to multiple visions of the region.

Debates over "Alsatianness" found purchase not simply in the fields of ethnography, literature, and history, but also in the realm of memory. German authorities and Alsatians sought to define the region's past to legitimize their respective political visions. For the Germans, this meant linking Alsatian history to the "Germany" of the Holy Roman Empire. Not just schools, but public spaces in Alsace such as the Strasbourg train station⁹ or the castle of Hohkoenigsburg became sites for such historical lessons. For Francophile Alsatians, such a goal assumed differing forms. Opposition was one route. For example, Alsatian deputies tried to undermine the restoration of Hohkoenigsburg.¹⁰ In other cases, this meant tying Alsace to France in a more explicit manner, such as in the Auguste Bartholdi statue in Colmar or the monument to the fallen French soldiers of the battle of Wissembourg.¹¹

The various cultural conceptions of Alsatian regionalism possessed analogues in the political arena. While the earlier cultural battles were motivated by specific visions of Alsace, it was precisely during debates over a new regional constitution that the deep political and cultural divisions among Alsatians became most apparent. The subsequent elections for the Landtag of Alsace-Lorraine clearly demonstrated the limits of the Francophile "dual culture" within the local political scene. When a small group of politicians tried to form an umbrella political organization, the Union Nationale, to unite Alsatian interests, they failed miserably. Center Party leaders refused to work with the group's anti-clerical members, and Liberals and Social Democrats rejected a coalition that included a religious agenda. Despite the acrimonious constitutional debates and electoral campaigns, Alsatian leaders managed to rally in anger against German mistreatment and poor administration, in particular during the Zabern Affair.¹²

The First World War served as a pivotal point in altering Alsatian attitudes toward nation and region. The poor treatment of Alsatians in

the German army, harsh martial law at home, and lack of input into German plans for the region's future reversed much of the progress of integration achieved over the previous decades.¹³ French authorities, in contrast, tried to win over Alsatian loyalties. Alsatian prisoners of war from the German Army, for example, were placed into special camps, offered generous rations of tobacco and alcohol, made to dress in French uniforms, given French lessons, and even asked to join the French Army; few volunteered. Some troops remained loyal to Germany, even regaling a French colonel with the song *Wacht am Rhein*.¹⁴ Potential strains between French officials and Francophile Alsations likewise rose to the surface in post-war planning. Such problems, however, belonged to the future, as German mistreatment of Alsations generally alienated them from Germany, made them more receptive for a return to France, and convinced them of their own unique if tragic circumstances.¹⁵

Cheering throngs met French troops in November 1918; Raymond Poincaré, the French President who hailed from neighboring Lorraine, happily proclaimed in a Strasbourg speech that "le plebiscite est fait."¹⁶ Yet such initial enthusiasm quickly waned in response to French policies. French authorities mistakenly understood Alsace to be the loyal region of 1871, an error compounded by the memory of those Francophile Alsations who had remained in the region to defend French interests. Alsace, however, had changed in the intervening five decades, as had France. The vast majority of Alsations spoke German, had served in the German army, remained devoutly religious, and had developed a strong regional identity. France, in contrast, had become more secular, more nationalistic, and had suffered through a long and brutal war. While certainly not predestined, it is also unsurprising that French authorities and Alsations quickly clashed over the proper management of regional affairs.¹⁷

Ironically, the French managed to commit many of the same errors as the Germans had in the 1870s. French mistakes, in turn, aroused the very regionalism that the French had encouraged under German rule. Alsatian regionalism nonetheless remained moderate, and Alsatian leaders sought compromise with the French Third Republic. However, the decision of the Herriot government in 1924 to introduce all French laws into Alsace, including those separating church and state, galvanized the region's Catholic population.¹⁸

This mobilization of the region's Catholic population reflects the importance of overlapping forms of identity, as attacks on the region's Catholicism were protested through the means of regionalism. Issues of language, educational system, and regional autonomy all came to the fore in the ensuing debates. Of greater importance for the immediate politics in the region, this resurgent, religiously-inspired regionalism served as a wedge for more militant groups to move to the fore.

Organizations such as the Heimatbund tried to mimic the idea of the 1911 Union National in order to form an overarching organization of interested regional parties. Like its forerunner, the Heimatbund largely failed to garner widespread support, but like the Union National it too managed to reshape political discourse in the region.¹⁹ The Heimatbund and its political successors often framed their demands in the Wilsonian rhetoric of self-determination, seeking far-reaching administrative autonomy, permission for the use of German, and the protection of the religious status quo. Such demands met a frigid reception, especially as the pain and sacrifice of the war reinforced an already nationalistic conception of Alsace as a French province. The government moved harshly against such autonomists by banning newspapers and trying autonomist leaders as traitors.

More importantly, such struggles overshadowed the efforts of moderate Alsatian regionalists to improve French-Alsatian relations, thereby dividing many of the local parties into strongly nationalist and staunchly regionalist camps. Indeed, even the leading party of Alsace for several decades, the Catholic Union Populaire Républicaine, found itself divided. In the tension-filled years of the late 1920s, the voices of even moderate regionalism were drowned out in the cacophonous polemics of French nationalists and increasingly radical, then separatist, members of the autonomy movement.

Amid the politicized debates over the future of the region, fights also occurred over the nature and future of the region's culture. Autonomists tried to stress the unique qualities of Alsatian culture, often drawing upon the heritage of the *Revue alsacienne illustré*. Though they relied less on the arguments of the region's "dual culture" in favor of the idea of a national minority, they nonetheless argued for the right of Alsations to maintain their "Germanic" heritage. Yet a "dual culture" conception did not wither. Gustav Stoskopf and his literary circle, at times in the face of opposition from their more assimilationist, Francophile countrymen, reopened the Alsatian theater. Later, they would found literary journals whose political bent clearly favored France. Alsatian particularism, in this mindset, could coexist with loyalty to the French nation. Indeed, some "assimilationist" Alsations deliberately employed regionalism to ease the return to the *mère-patrie*.

In the 1930s, Alsations and the French government began to find a *modus vivendi*. As the Alsatian autonomist movement began to splinter into a variety of increasingly radical groups, it saw its already tenuous support slip away. Moreover, the French government took a more moderate approach in the region, relenting in its campaign to Frenchify the region. Finally, the rise of the Nazis, and later, the gathering storms of

war, made more radical promulgations of support for German culture suspect.²⁰

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Regionalism as a political language, as a cultural vision, and as a central community of identity stood at the forefront of developments in Alsace from its annexation by Germany in 1871 until well into the interwar decades. Alsatians repeatedly turned to regionalism to express their displeasure with German or French measures, and more centrally, to assert their own desires for the future. Yet internal Alsatian divisions over national loyalty, religion, political ideology, and the very meaning of Alsatianness splintered this movement into a variety of competing regionalisms.

The diversity of regionalisms in Alsace between 1871 and 1940, in turn, speaks to a more complicated relationship between region and nation. Elements of a common Alsatian identity did emerge, largely based on folklore, the local dialect, and a conception of Alsatian culture sharing in both the German and French cultural spheres. Yet unlike in much of France or Germany, regionalism in Alsace never became a purely integrative force with the nation. For some Alsatians, the region could nicely merge with the nation. For many, though, regionalism remained a means of defending a range of interests: religious, social, economic, linguistic, and political. Indeed, Alsatian regionalism stood at its strongest when joined to other identities. Alsatian regionalism therefore had a powerful allure, if varied success, in providing Alsatians with a means of protest, sense of agency, and form of community against the tides of fortune as a border region between two great powers.

As a region on a border, finally, Alsace allows us to reconsider the differences and similarities between differing ethnic German and civic French conceptions of the nation-state. Germany, with its federalized conception of the state and emphasis on language and race, could not countenance the defense of the French heritage in the region and thus denied the Alsatians full membership in the German Empire. The French, in contrast, wished to include Alsace in a centralized French Third Republic; the Alsatian desire to have a regional administration, to speak German, and to maintain a strong role for religion all flew in the face of the prevailing Jacobin notion of nationhood. Alsatians wanted to be French, but not on terms acceptable to the French.

The history of Alsatian regionalism is tinged with numerous ironies. The French and Germans pursued markedly similar goals and policies in the region, only to find the Alsatians repeatedly invoking a strong regional identity in defense of local prerogatives. Germany was a nation of

regions, yet nationalist administrators consistently refused to accept the Alsatians' definition of their region's unique characteristics. The French encouraged Alsatian regionalism before 1914, yet found themselves at a loss when the Alsatians called upon the same sense of regional loyalty to resist French policies. Perhaps the greatest irony, however, was the inability of Alsatians to reconcile their dual culture with either the German or French nation-state despite their desire to do so. For many Alsatians, "Alsace to the Alsatians" could also mean "Alsace within Germany" or "Alsace within France." France, however, saw the German face of the Alsatian Janus, Germans the French. The fractured vision of "Alsace to the Alsatians" only furthered Alsace's divided destiny.

Notes

¹ Christian Baechler, *Le parti catholique alsacien 1890–1939, du Reichsland à la République jacobine* (Paris, 1982); John E. Craig, *Scholarship and Nation Building: The Universities of Strasbourg and Alsatian Society, 1870–1939* (Chicago, 1984); Samuel Goodfellow, *Between the Swastika and the Cross of Lorraine* (Dekalb, 1999); Steven Harp, *Learning to be Loyal: Primary Schooling as Nation Building in Alsace and Lorraine* (Dekalb, 1998); David Allen Harvey, *Constructing Class and Identity in Alsace, 1830–1945* (Dekalb, 2001); Herman Hiery, *Reichstagswahlen im Reichsland: Ein Beitrag zur Landesgeschichte von Elsass-Lothringen und zur Wahlgeschichte des deutschen Reiches, 1871–1918* (Düsseldorf, 1986); Jean-Marie Mayeur, *Autonomie et politique en Alsace: La Constitution de 1911* (Paris, 1970); Karl-Heinz Rothenberger, *Die elsass-lothringische Heimat- und Autonomiebewegung* (Frankfurt, 1975); Anthony Steinhoff, "Protestants in Strasbourg, 1870–1919: Religion and Society in Late Nineteenth-Century Europe" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1996); Bernard Vogler, *Histoire culturelle de l'Alsace* (Strasbourg, 1994).

² Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley, 1990); Celia Applegate, "A Europe of Regions: Reflections on the Historiography of Sub-National Places in Modern Times," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 4 (Oct. 1999): 1157–1182; Alon Confino, *The Nation as Local Metaphor: Wuerttemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871–1918* (Chapel Hill, 1997); Caroline Ford, *Creating the Nation in Provincial France: Religion and Political Identity in Brittany* (Princeton, 1993); Shanny Peer, *France on Display: Peasants, Provincials, and Folklore in the 1937 Paris World's Fair* (New York, 1998); Anne Marie Thiesse, *Ecrire la France: Le mouvement littéraire régionaliste de la langue française entre la Belle Epoque et la Libération* (Paris, 1991); Anne Marie Thiesse, *Ils apprenaient la France: l'exaltation des régions dans le discours patriotique* (Paris, 1997).

³ The earlier view of Jack Morrison has colored much of the English-language literature on the subject. See Jack G. Morrison, "The Intransigents: The Alsace-Lorrainers against the Annexation, 1900–1914" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1970).

⁴ Vogler, *Histoire culturelle*, 239–250.

⁵ James Wilkinson, "The Uses of Popular Culture by Rival Elites: The Case of Alsace, 1890–1918," *History of European Ideas* 11 (1989): 605–18.

⁶ Georges Bischoff, "L'invention de l'Alsace," *Saisons d'Alsace* 119 (Spring 1993): 35–70; Jean-Claude Richez, "L'Alsace revue et inventée: *La Revue alsacienne illustrée, 1895–1914*," *Saisons d'Alsace* 119 (Spring 1993): 83–94.

⁷ See, for example, Gustave Stoskopf, *Hofliant: elsässische Komödie in drei Aufzüge* (Strasbourg, 1906); *D'r Verbotte Fahne: elsässische Komödie in drei Aufzügen* (Strasbourg, 1900); *Demonstration: elsässische Komödie in drei Akten* (Strasbourg, 1904).

⁸ Archives Départementales du Haut Rhin (hereafter ADHR) J 81/49a “Notes Biographiques”. See also Jean-Jacques Waltz, *L’Histoire d’Alsace: Racontée aux petits enfants d’Alsace et de France par l’oncle Hansi* (Paris, 1913; reprint 1915); Jean-Jacques Waltz., *Mon Village: Ceux qui n’oublent pas; images et commentaires par l’oncle Hansi* (Paris, 1913).

⁹ Klaus Nohlen, *Baupolitik im Reichsland Elsass-Lothringen, 1871–1918* (Berlin, 1982).

¹⁰ *Stenographisches Protokoll des Landesausschusses*, XXXVIII Session, 2. Sitzung (5 February 1901); *Stenographisches Protokoll des Landesausschusses*, XXXVIII Session, 6. Sitzung (28 February 1901); *Stenographisches Protokoll des Landesausschusses*, XXXIII Session, 21. Sitzung (25 April 1906).

¹¹ Archives Départementales du Bas-Rhin (hereafter ADBR) 71 AL 21, “Einweihung des Bartholdi-Denkmal” and ADBR 247 D 23(b), “Die Feierlichkeiten anlaesslich der Einweihung des franzoesischen Kriegerdenkmals bei Weissenburg.”

¹² Mayeur, *Autonomie*.

¹³ Christopher Fischer, “War Weariness or National Reunion? Alsace, 1914–1918,” *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 29 (2003): 223–231.

¹⁴ ADHR AJ 30/85 (Purg. 11745) “Régime des prisonniers de guerre alsaciens lorrains,” signed Ed. Ignace; Circular on the treatment of Alsatians, signed Verand; report entitled “Traitement réservé en France aux prisonniers de guerre alsaciens-lorrains: dépôts spéciaux.” This particular incident also found its way back to German authorities in 1918, when an interned German officer managed to send them a lengthy report on the special treatment of Alsatians. See ADBR 22 AL 59, “Die Behandlung der els.-lothr. Kriegsgefangnen in Frankreich: Die Spezialläger” signed Gabriel Welter (June 1918).

¹⁵ Fischer, “War Weariness”; Alan Kramer, “Wackes at War: Alsace-Lorraine and the Failure of German National Mobilization, 1914–1918,” in *State, Society, and Mobilization in Europe During the First World War*, ed. John Horne (New York, 1997).

¹⁶ “Discours de M. Poincaré,” *Elsässer* (12 Dec. 1918).

¹⁷ Stefan Fisch, “Assimilation und Eigenständigkeit,” *Historisches Jahrbuch* 117, no. 1 (1997): 111–12. Baechler, *Le parti catholique*; Jean-Jacques Becker, “L’opinion publique française et l’Alsace en 1914,” *Revue d’Alsace* 109 (1983): 125–138; Laird Boswell, “From Liberation to Purge Trials in the ‘Mythic Provinces’: Recasting French Identities in Alsace and Lorraine, 1918–1920,” *French Historical Studies* 23, no. 1 (2000): 129–162, 129–135; François Dreyfus, *La vie politique en Alsace, 1919–1936* (Paris, 1969), 24–27; Stefan Fisch, “Dimensionen einer historischen Systemtransformation: Zur Verwaltung des Elsass nach seiner Rückkehr zu Frankreich,” in *Staat Verwaltung: Fünfzig Jahre Hochschule für Verwaltungswissenschaften Speyer*, ed. Klaus Luedtke (Berlin, 1997), 381–98; Stefan Fisch, “Assimilation und Eigenständigkeit: Zur Wiedervereinigung,” *Historisches Jahrbuch* 117, no. 1 (1997): 111–28; William Shane Story, “Constructing French Alsace: A State, Region, and Nation” (Ph.D. diss., Rice University, 2001), 18–33.

¹⁸ Baechler, *Le parti catholique*, 336–48; “Die Ankündigung des Kulturkampfes,” *Elsässer Kurier* (19 June 1924); “Die elsass-lothringischen Abgeordneten verlangen ein Plebiszit über die Kirchen und Schulfrage,” *Elsässer Kurier* (20 June 1924).

¹⁹ Rothenberger, *Elsass-lothringische Heimat- und Autonomiebewegung*, 89ff.

²⁰ Goodfellow, *Between the Swastika and the Cross of Lorraine*.