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Detmar Klein



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Battleground of Cultures: «Politics of Identities» and the National Question in Alsace under German Imperial Rule (1870-1914)

Detmar Klein

- 1 This doctoral thesis was undertaken under the supervision of Professor Pamela Pilbeam (Royal Holloway College, University of London) and was submitted to the University of London which subsequently awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in 2004.
- 2 The thesis takes German-annexed Alsace in the period between 1870 and 1918 as a case study to investigate the process of nation-building and the implications of «identity politics» in a nationally contested border area. This topic is explored from both the Alsatian and the German angles, and special emphasis is put on the interdependence and interweaving of its cultural and political elements.
- 3 Even nowadays, Alsace is a country whose strange mix of French and apparently German elements is fascinating and where the Alsatian-German dialect is still strong. Between 1870 and 1945, Alsations experienced four times a change in nationality, without ever being asked what they themselves wanted. Despite being a germanophone area, the German annexation of 1871 was not welcome in Alsace, nor was it in neighbouring Lorraine which was predominantly francophone and which had had few ties with Alsace before 1871: both ended up in the so-called *Reichsland Elsass-Lothringen* which right through to the end was governed by German authorities that ultimately depended on «Berlin» and the Emperor. Even several decades after the annexation native Alsations were rarely found on the middle and upper levels of the Reichsland administration. As for the end of the peace-time annexation period, it is still a contentious issue as to what extent Alsace had become German. Undoubtedly, and not surprisingly, the victorious French were received with open arms in late 1918, at the end of a war which had seen Alsations being unfairly and even brutally treated by Imperial Germany. The enthusiasm was short-lived on the part of most Alsations. As

early as a year later, the so-called *malaise alsacien* emerged, as a response to France's insensitive Frenchification policies in Alsace. The subsequent anti-French *Heimatrechtsbewegung*, a movement battling for the rights of the Alsatian homeland vis-à-vis the French state, showed that Alsace was keen on keeping its (non-French) peculiarities, that it did not want to become like any other French province. Whilst the development after 1918 proves that the German annexation had definitely left its imprint on the identity of Alsace and certainly deserves mentioning, the objective of the thesis is to focus the investigation on the development until the First World War on its own merits and not argue backwards from the post-war point of view.

- 4 The question of the national identity of Alsace under German rule from 1870 until 1914/18 is usually approached by means of applying the categories of Frenchness and Germanness, with most scholars tending towards the conclusion that Alsace was on its way of becoming - albeit reluctantly - German, whilst some ascribe more importance to Alsace's anti-German and pro-French manifestations¹. Those who work with the notion of an Alsatian identity fall into two camps : some scholars see in it a crypto-French identity², and/or they view it as a product of the machinations of a Francophile bourgeoisie intent on keeping their power rather than an expression of a genuine Alsatian identity adopted by all Alsations³; on the opposite side there are those who perceive the evolving Alsatian identity as a regional identity within the wider concentric circle of German national identity⁴, or they speak of an Alsatian political consciousness with parallels to particularistic-minded Bavaria⁵. The categories of Frenchness and Germanness certainly played a major role in shaping the way Alsations felt about themselves and are vital for a proper understanding of the process of their identity formation after 1870. The thesis gives ample space to the analysis of the French and German elements in the Alsatian culture, and it shows the Alsations' continuing love of French culture.
- 5 It needs to be stressed, however, that the political and cultural development of Alsace under German rule suggests that the dichotomy of French versus German is too narrow as a conceptual framework and that the classification of Alsatian identity as a merely regional or particularistic identity within the German national context does not do it justice. The investigation into hitherto unexplored politico-cultural manifestations of Alsatian life breaks new ground and forces us to take into account the idea of an evolving Alsatian national identity in its own right - a conclusion which goes further than any other existing study of Alsace of the period in question. This notion envisages a proto-national rather than a mere regional identity, with the potential of developing towards a kind of Luxembourg if the international situation had allowed it. Whilst in the beginning of the annexation period the Alsatian *dictum* of *Allemand ne veut, Français ne peut, Alsacien je suis* clearly had its emphasis on *Allemand ne veut, Français ne peut*, from the 1890s onwards this was gradually changing towards an emphatic *Alsacien je suis*: Such an Alsatian identity was not only defined in the negative in terms of *Allemand ne veut, Français ne peut* but also in the positive by means of elevating the Alsatian-German dialect to a «national» language and Alsatian characteristics and peculiarities (such as the traditional woman's headdress or even the stork or Sauerkraut) to «national» symbols and icons. That this cultural engineering of Alsatianness by an educated elite reached also the lower classes of the population can be witnessed in the success of the Alsatian dialect theatre.

- 6 A vital condition for this new evolving Alsatianness was the behaviour of the German conqueror. Germany did not allow Alsace any leanings towards its former *patrie* and despite some major concessions on the eve of the First World War never gave it full political autonomy on a par with all the other federal states of the Reich. Government and administration only saw few Alsatians in important functions, the Alsatians were generally kept as second-class Germans and were even subjected to vexatious Germanisation measures. Therefore, Alsatian interests were not seldom guided by sheer pragmatism or even opportunism, as a means of survival vis-à-vis oppressive German policies. This situation led not only to Alsatians often hiding their true feelings and intentions and indulging in ambiguity but it also provided a fertile ground for creating an Alsatianness which was on its way of becoming a proper national identity.
- 7 Alsace was caught up right in the middle between the two enemy *Kampfgemeinschaften* (battle nations) of France and Germany, and it was a symbolic battlefield on which these two battle nations continued to confront each other after 1871⁶. The actual combatants on this battlefield were, however, not so much the French and the Germans, it was rather the case of Alsatians fighting Germans and Germans fighting Alsatians. The Alsatians cherished their French past and the French cultural heritage, and they resisted with varying degrees of success German attempts at eradicating the Frenchness of Alsace. To the immigrant Germans and to the new German Reich, Alsace was a combat zone where the search for a unified German national culture took on the aspect of a sometimes ridiculous fight between Germanness and Frenchness and where the Reich's national-cultural «inferiority-cum-superiority complex» was most pronounced. The thesis takes Alsace as a case study to look into this German «syndrome». This phenomenon was marked by a certain insecurity as to the content and value of the idea of nationhood and by both the fear and (often unacknowledged) admiration of French culture, whilst simultaneously displaying national superciliousness, a penchant for militaristic forms in society and sometimes even an ostentatious disdain for France and all things French, most notably amongst those circles of society where Pan-German modes of thought were widespread. The German Reich was a state that would not tolerate any elements considered to be foreign but would force them into submitting to a nationalisation process, a process which was all the more difficult in view of strong particularistic tendencies of states such as Bavaria.
- 8 The objective of nationalisation led the Germans to their attempt at thoroughly germanising Alsace. This thesis is the first comprehensive investigation into the complex issue of the Germanisation of Alsace, drawing together and commenting upon various aspects analysed by other authors⁷, and exploring hitherto unexamined archival and press material, particularly in the realms of French inscriptions, signs and emblems. The Germanisation measures which at times were both vexatious and ridiculous encompassed the elimination of anything reminiscent of the French past of Alsace. In public space, French inscriptions like *coiffeur* or *pharmacie* were generally not tolerated, and the singing of the Marseillaise or even the most harmless colour combination of blue, white and red could easily be (and often were) interpreted by the authorities as a seditious and thus punishable pro-French manifestation - a state of affairs which was regularly castigated and satirised by Alsatian politicians and newspaper columnists. They ridiculed the often absurd actions and re-actions of the German authorities and used humour as a weapon: the Alsatian confident «underdog» against the German nationally insecure and vulnerable «Goliath». This study is the

first to investigate these issues and establish to what extent they were a measure of Alsatian francophilia or rather a representation of a mood of rebellion against the German authorities. It covers new ground in the sense of analysing the topic of Germanisation also from the German angle, covering the whole spectrum from the press and the politicians right up to the Emperor and telling us a lot about certain segments of German society and their views of Germany and Germanness, with a special focus on Bismarck, Wilhelm II, and the Pan-Germans.

- 9 The German endeavour of Germanisation had only very limited success in the cultural realm: Whilst knowledge of the French language declined, the lure of French culture did not, and High German was only used where and when necessary. Furthermore, aggressive Germanisation policies prevented the rise of any sympathy for Germany and strengthened the development of Alsatianisation. The portrayal of the development of this Alsatianisation is at the heart of the thesis. The cultural Alsatianisation started around 1890, when the Alsatians realized that there was no realistic hope of returning to the *mère-patrie* and that open protestation against Germany was a political *cul-de-sac*, and it was quickly followed by a political Alsatianisation. Both forms of Alsatianisation developed in close interdependence, reinforcing each other.
- 10 The concept of a rather ambiguous Alsatianness «invented» an Alsace previously unknown. The so-called «Awakening of the Alsatian Soul» was a cultural enterprise undertaken by the intellectual elite, and it comprised both elitist and popular forms, the former as embodied by the *Revue Alsacienne Illustrée*, the latter as expressed in the satirical comedies of the Alsatian dialect theatre and in the caricatures and satirical writings of Hansi and Zislin. In all of the manifestations of the «Alsatian Awakening» it was «The German» as «The Other» against whom an identity was continuously being constructed in the negative. Alsatians cherished their French heritage, and they were not able and did not want to feel German, but they still had to live their lives in the German Reich and make the best out of it. Cultural Alsatianness found its icon in the figure of the traditionally clad *Alsacienne* with her headdress. The most distinctive feature of the new Alsatianness was its satirical humour, a powerful tool of any underdog. Caricatures and satirical texts, and the hugely popular satirical comedies of the Alsatian dialect theatre, they all used laughter as an anti-German weapon and as a means of constructing and reinforcing this Alsatianness. The wide range of study material allows us to gauge public opinion beyond an elite discourse. So far, the national component of Alsatian humour and the responses it engendered amongst the German administrative and judiciary authorities and amongst the German public have only partly or superficially been investigated by those few scholars who have looked at this topic, a gap which is closed by this thesis⁸. By studying the works of the caricaturists Hansi and Zislin and the judicial prosecution they provoked we get not only a good idea of their version of Alsatianness, an *alsacianité* which was in fact a crypto-French identity, but we also find out about the Germans' ideas of Germanness. Hansi's and Zislin's propaganda was appreciated and successful because it provided the Alsatians with food for laughter and with the opportunity to give their own back on the Germans. However, it was the Alsatianness as represented by the Alsatian dialect theatre - the so-called Alsatian Theatre, founded in 1898 - that seemed somehow more appropriate to the Alsatian mentality than Hansi's and Zislin's crude anti-Germanness: The Alsatian Theatre transcended the French/German dichotomy into a true Alsatianness that distanced itself not only from alleged «excesses» and traits of Germanness - such as haughtiness, penchant for *Kitsch*, unrefined manners, militarism -

but also from alleged «excessive» French traits such as dandyism, which were seen as «out of place» in Alsace. Still, there was no doubt as to Alsace's continuing love of France. An in-depth analysis of the Alsatian Theatre's satirical portrayal of stereotypes of Germans, French and Alsatians proves that keeping (a little bit of) distance from France was not just pulling the wool over Germany's eyes so as to get the authorities' approval but actually formed part of the new Alsatian identity. And the Theatre's success means that this concept was accepted by the population. Alsatianness stood for an Alsatian homeland without a *grande patrie* or a *Vaterland*: in this sense the new Alsatian identity was more than just a regional identity. Although Hansi's and Zislin's goal was just a regional Alsatian identity within the French *grande patrie* they willy-nilly contributed to and reinforced this embryonic, proto-national Alsatian identity.

- 11 Throughout the Reichsland era the question of «identity» loomed large over Alsace, referring not only to the national categories of anti-Germanness, pro-Frenchness and Alsatianness but also to the factor of religion. Furthermore, there was the issue of material, class interests. It is the interplay of all the relevant factors in the political, social and cultural spheres, which gives us an idea of the identities of Alsatians during the Reichsland period. In the context of both religious and class identities and their claims to power and hegemony in a period of formation of mass political parties, and in view of a mass immigration of Germans into Alsace, we witness «politics of identities» revolving around the national issue and making use of cultural factors such as language, religion, collective memory, political consciousness, *mentalités* and perceptions of «The Other». Throughout the period of annexation the religious factor was a strong one: The majority of Alsatians were Catholics who perceived the new German Reich as an anti-Catholic oppressor. A good example of the importance of religion are the «national-religious» Marian apparitions in the early 1870s, which produced the extraordinary phenomenon of the Virgin Mary wielding a sword against Prussian spike-helmeted soldiers. An illuminating example of the intertwining of «politics of identities» and «politics of interests» and thus one of the major focal points of the thesis are the political lives of two Alsatian «collaborators» and the responses they got from their fellow countrymen: Baron Zorn de Bulach senior, *ancien chambellan* of Napoleon III, and his son Hugo, a former French lieutenant whose political career found its climax in the period between 1908 and 1914 when he headed the Reichsland government under the tutelage of the German Reichsland governor.
- 12 « Politics of identities » were always accompanied by «politics of interests»; in fact, on the lower levels of local and regional councils and assemblies «politics of interests» were often the more relevant - regardless of the identity or identities chosen by the actors of these politics. But it needs to be stressed that it was «politics of identities» that dominated the political discourse and practice in Alsace - partly out of a genuine concern with the question of identity, partly out of a desire to disguise very materialistic «politics of interests». The new cultural Alsatianness was directed against the Prussian-German programme of the cultural Borussification-Germanisation of Alsace, and it also provided the backup for the battle on the political front, supporting the Alsatian fight for a full political emancipation within the German Reich and against the continuing discrimination of the Alsatians in many fields of life. The growing assimilation of the political party structures in Alsace to those of the Reich did not bring about a Germanisation - as is claimed by those scholars who tend towards assuming an Alsatian regional-particularistic identity within the wider German national identity - but it produced an Alsatianisation of the politicians and of the

population at large. The thesis shows in detail that within structures which became increasingly German there was a content that never became German but solely focused on Alsace or, when the political interests of the Reichsland as a whole were concerned, on Alsace-Lorraine: the latter being viewed by Alsatians as a German political artefact whose (smaller and politically less important) «Lorraine» part they either subsumed into Alsace or ignored. As a result of cultural and political Alsatianisation, a proto-national Alsatian identity was firmly established by 1914, a national identity which was no longer French but which was definitely not German either. This assertion is confirmed by the immediate post-war development after *désannexion*.

- 13 Alsace under German Imperial rule provides a fascinating study object in the context of the current nationalism/regionalism debate⁹. The last few years have witnessed a Europe-wide resurgence of interest in regions, not only in academia, but also in politics. The notion of a «Europe of Regions» is gaining ground, adding an interesting twist to the struggle between «Brussels» and the nation states. It is hoped that the thesis contributes to a better understanding of both the processes of nationalisation and the relationship between nation and region.

NOTES

1. HERMANN(JosephHiery), *Reichstagswahlen im Reichsland* (Düsseldorf, 1986) ; SILVERMAN (Dan P.), *Reluctant Union : Alsace-Lorraine and Imperial Germany 1871-1918* (London, 1988) ; SCHOENBAUM (David), *Zabern 1913 : Consensus Politics in Imperial Germany* (London, Boston, Sydney, 1982) ; CRAIG (John E.), *Scholarship and Nation-Building: The Universities of Strasbourg and Alsatian Society 1870-1939* (Chicago, London, 1984) ; MORRISON (Jack G.), *The Intransigents: Alsace-Lorrainers against the Annexation, 1900-1914* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Iowa, 1970), and CARON (Vicky), *Between France and Germany: The Jews of Alsace-Lorraine 1871-1918* (Stanford, 1988) stress the anti-German and pro-French elements in Alsace.
2. RICHEZ (Jean-Claude),« L'Alsace revue et inventée : La Revue Alsacienne Illustrée », *Saisons d'Alsace*, no. 119 (1993), pp. 83-93 ; BISCHOFF (Georges), « L'invention de l'Alsace », *Saisons d'Alsace*, no. 119 (1993), pp. 35-69.
3. RICHEZ, *ibid.* ; IGERSEIM (François), *L'Alsace des notables (1870-1914) : La bourgeoisie et le peuplealsacien* (Strasbourg, 1981) ; SMITH (Paul), « A la recherche d'une identité nationale en Alsace (1870-1918) », *Vingtième Siècle*, no. 50 (April/June 1996), pp. 23-35 ; SMITH (Paul), « The Alsatians and the Alsace-Lorraine question in European politics », in Paul Smith (ed., in collaboration with Kalliopi K. Koufa and Arnold Suppan), *Ethnic groups in International Relations* (Aldershot, New York, 1991), pp. 59-83.
4. So HARP (Stephen L.), *Learning to Be Loyal: Primary Schooling as Nation-Building in Alsace and Lorraine 1850-1940* (DeKalb, IL, 1998), p. 159.
5. VOGLER (Bernard), *Histoire politique de l'Alsace de la Révolution à nos jours : un panorama des passions alsaciennes* (Strasbourg, 1995), p. 211 ; VOGLER (Bernard), *Histoire culturelle de l'Alsace : du Moyen Age à nos jours, les très riches heures d'une région frontière* (Strasbourg, 1994). Similar : BAECHLER (Christian), *Le Parti catholique alsacien 1890-1939 : Du Reichsland à la République jacobine* (Paris, 1982).

6. As to the notion of *Kampfgemeinschaften*, see SCHULZE (Hagen), *Staat und Nation in der europäischen Geschichte* (Munich, 1994), p. 126. See also JEISMANN (Michael), *Das Vaterland der Feinde: Studien zum nationalen Feindbegriff und Selbstverständnis in Deutschland und Frankreich 1792-1918* (Stuttgart, 1992), and HANNES SIEGRIST (Etienne François) and VOGEL (Jakob) (eds.), *Nation und Emotion: Deutschland und Frankreich im Vergleich, 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1995).
7. HARP (Stephen L.), *Learning to Be Loyal: Primary Schooling as Nation-Building in Alsace and Lorraine 1850-1940* (DeKalb, IL, 1998); CRAIG (John E.), *Scholarship and Nation-Building: The Universities of Strasbourg and Alsatian Society 1870-1939* (Chicago, London, 1984); NOHLEN (Klaus), *Baupolitik im Reichsland Elsaß-Lothringen 1871-1918 - Die repräsentativen Staatsbauten um den ehemaligen Kaiserplatz in Strassburg* (Berlin, 1982); SPEITKAMP (Winfried), «Vom deutschen Nationaldenkmal zum französischen Erinnerungsort: Die Hochkönigsburgim Elsass», in Etienne Francois, M.C. Hooek-Demarle and R. Meyer-Kalkus (eds.), *Marianne-Germania: Deutsch-französischer Kulturtransfer im europäischen Kontext 1789-1914* (Leipzig, 1998), pp. 207-29; LEVY (Paul), *Histoire linguistique d'Alsace et de Lorraine* (2 vols.; Paris, 1929); RIMMELE (Eva), *Sprachenpolitik im Deutschen Kaiserreich vor 1914: Regierungspolitik und veröffentlichte Meinung in Elsaß-Lothringen und den östlichen Provinzen Preußens* (Frankfurt a. M., 1996).
8. PERREAU (Robert), *Hansi ou l'Alsace révélée* (Colmar, 1975); WILKINSON (James), «The uses of popular culture by rival elites: The case of Alsace 1890-1914», *History of European Ideas*, vol. 2 (1989), pp. 605-17; CERF (Eve), «Le Théâtre Alsacien de Strasbourg: Miroir d'une société (1898-1939)», *Saisons d'Alsace*, no. 43 (1972), pp. 337-59.
9. See, e.g., CONFINO (Alon), *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany and National Memory 1871-1918* (Chapel Hill, London, 1997); APPELEGATE (Celia), *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, 1990); HANISCH (Manfred), *Für Fürst und Vaterland: Legitimitätsstiftung in Bayern zwischen Revolution 1848 und deutscher Einheit* (Munich, 1991); BAYCROFT (Timothy), «Changing identities in the Franco-Belgian borderland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries», *French History*, vol. 13, no. 4 (December 1999), pp. 417-38; UCELAY DA CAL (Enric), «The nationalisms of the periphery: Culture and politics in the construction of national identity», in Helen Graham and Jo Labanyi (eds.), *Spanish Cultural Studies: An Introduction - The Struggle for Modernity* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 32-9; FRANDSEN (Steen Bo), «Regions and nationalism in the Danish monarchy», in Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, Michael G. Müller and Stuart Woolf (eds.), *Regional and National Identities in Europe in the XIXth and XXth centuries - Les Identités Régionales et Nationales en Europe aux XIX^e et XX^e Siècles*, pub. by European University Institute Florence (The Hague, 1998), pp. 191-220.

AUTHOR

DETMAR KLEIN

Docteur, University College Cork, Ireland