

**Raise the white flag:  
Conflict and collaboration in Alsace**

by

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## **Abstract**

The history of Alsace in the modern period provides historians with an opportunity to examine the course and effects of collaboration both before and after the momentous events of the Second World War. The Alsatian experience suggests that collaboration can be a rational choice for the articulation of social and political conflicts within an occupied region. The peculiar divided linguistic and cultural identity of Alsace in particular created a pool of potential collaborators for both France and Germany throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the same time, each new invasion created new opportunities to settle old scores and improve the social mobility of particular groups. However, the detrimental effects of Alsatian adaptability increased with every regime change, and the enormous impact of the National Socialist government broke the cycle of collaboration, purge and counter-collaboration in the region. As a result, Alsatians quickly developed a discourse of total victimhood that allowed them to collectively turn away from Germany, integrate more thoroughly into France and overlook the implications of their own collaborationist past in the post-war period.

## **Résumé**

L'histoire de l'Alsace, pour ce qui est de la période moderne, donne aux historiens l'opportunité d'examiner le processus et les effets de la collaboration, avant comme après les principaux événements de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale. L'expérience alsacienne implique que la collaboration peut avoir constitué un choix rationnel par rapport à l'articulation des conflits sociaux et politiques au sein d'une région occupée. Les spécificités liées à l'Alsace, une région dont l'identité culturelle et linguistique est divisée, créèrent un environnement pour des collaborateurs potentiels pour la France comme pour l'Allemagne aux dix-neuvième et vingtième siècles. En même temps, avec chaque invasion s'annoncèrent de nouvelles opportunités de régler de vieux comptes et de permettre l'ascension sociale de certains groupes. Malgré tout, les effets négatifs de l'adaptabilité alsacienne s'accrurent avec chaque changement de régime, et l'impact considérable du gouvernement National-Socialiste interrompit le cycle de collaboration, purges, et contre-collaboration dans la région. Ainsi, les Alsaciens développèrent rapidement un discours de victimisation totale, ce qui leur permit d'opérer une distanciation collective vis-à-vis de l'Allemagne, de s'intégrer plus complètement au sein de la France, et d'éluder les implications liées à leur propre passé collaborationniste au cours de l'après-guerre.

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## Introduction

“Collaboration” is a tricky business. While some (such as Hendrik Dethlefsen) have attempted to establish a broad, neutral definition of collaboration as “the continuing exercise of power under the pressure produced by an occupying power,” it continues to evoke powerful and often contradictory emotions that are capable of overpowering a more measured definition (Dethlefsen 1990, 199). Since the term developed into a description primarily of a relationship with brutal and aggressive regimes, most notably National Socialist Germany, “collaboration” has been unable to disentangle itself from connotations of treachery, venality and cruelty. This is partly due to the effects of collaboration itself. Successful collaboration can lead to a new or integrated social hierarchy that transforms the original act of collaboration into an act of patriotism in the eyes of future generations. Unsuccessful collaborators, on the other hand, find themselves with few friends to defend or explain their actions. At the same time, while invasions can destroy governing structures and elites, they can also open up new opportunities for dispossessed members of the occupied region. As a result, the motives and effects of working with a new authority depend largely on context.

The history of Alsace throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provides a unique example of a series of regimes that relied on the co-operation of sympathetic locals both before and after the watershed period of the Second World War. Historically, Alsatians have claimed to possess a unique regional identity that was nevertheless fissured by cultural and linguistic affinities with both Germany and France. During the tumultuous period between 1870 and 1945 the question of the dominance of French or German culture turned Alsatian intellectuals and artists away from more rarefied and universal pursuits (Schreiber 1988, 327). At the same time, as Alsatians found themselves shuffled between these two great powers, this dual identity provided a pool of potential collaborators for both States. As a result, collaboration in Alsace took on many of the attributes of a local partisan conflict. This was allowed to develop over a long period of time and affected both the occupied Alsatians and the two competing Imperial powers. The region was caught in a cycle of collaboration, purges and counter-collaboration which provide a robust example of the phenomenon of collaboration itself in different stages and contexts.

Collaboration provided a number of advantages to both the invading power and specific groups of Alsatians. However, with each new regime change, the cycle grew increasingly bitter and dangerous. This trend culminated in the Nazi occupation and annexation of 1940-44. As old elites were toppled and replaced by a new group of privileged collaborators in 1871, 1918 and 1940 the consequences were becoming disastrous. While Alsace did not escape the redefinition of the term “collaboration” that took place over the course of WWII to take into account the relationship between Vichy France and Nazi Germany in particular, the period had a profound effect on the development of a discourse of collaboration in Alsace. Rather than leading to a renewed condemnation of collaboration (or at least a few representative collaborators), the implications of both wartime collaboration itself and the post-war use of the term led Alsatians to turn away from the concept of collaboration entirely in favour of a discourse of “total victimhood.” This discourse corresponded with the Gaullist myth of *resistancialisme* and allowed Alsatians to break the cycle of collaboration and unite the formerly antagonistic groups in an Alsace that was imagined to be firmly embedded in French culture. The Alsatian example

therefore demonstrates both the advantages and dangers of collaboration for a small region caught between powerful enemies. Collaboration worked, but it often came at a high price. At the same time, the Alsatian experience of collaboration also demonstrates the profound effects the dislocations of the Second World War had on the region and its relationship to its neighbours.

## 1. Background: A complicated identity

Alsace provides an example of a social polity with a self-professed unique regional identity that was nevertheless deeply entangled in the culture and politics of both France and Germany. This both established an identity with a specific regional focus and provided a reserve army of potential collaborators in times of conflict between the two larger powers. In *Das Elsaß auf der Suche nach seiner Identität*, Michael Essig argues that Alsatian identity is in fact closely bound to the concept of *Heimat* (Essig 1994, 135). Like the English concept of home, the German *Vaterland* and French *patrie*, *Heimat* solidly anchors Alsatian identity in an identifiable geographical region which is invested with an enormous emotional appeal (ibid., 138). The concept offers a median position between tradition and modernization embodied palpably in physical surroundings (ibid., 139). Collective identity is thus rooted in “the soil,” geography, architecture and customs of the region and disintegrates the farther one moves from home (ibid., 138). This regional identity allowed Alsatians to maintain a sense of coherent collective identity despite its position between two formidable and often fractious nation states. At the same time, it fostered support for a broader European identity that would serve to disarm the centralizing tendencies of both (Craig 1984, 333). In practise, however, this often meant a delicate process of negotiation between French and German interests.

This rather rarefied provincial concept of *Heimat* is bolstered by both Alsatian cultural practise and Alsatians more practical capacity to survive momentous change. When questioned after the Second World War, Herr and Frau “E” identified Alsace as an entity entirely separate from both France and Germany which was nevertheless always on the side, or at least in the possession, of the victors.<sup>1</sup> Frau “E” in particular mused that it was important to “always fly the right flag”.<sup>2</sup> For Alsace, the right flag also meant the white flag. For Frau “E”’s father-in-law in particular, this meant peace rather than surrender (ibid., 301). However, while Alsatians like Herr and Frau “E” seem willing to submit to an invading power with surprisingly little resistance, they have traditionally been unwilling to accept full integration into either occupying nation. In Alsatian popular culture, this intransigence has been parlayed into a popular identification with a permanently dissatisfied people. This is notably expressed through the Alsatian folk song “Hans-im-Schnockeloch” in which:

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<sup>1</sup> “4. Ab) Schuld sin ja net die Leut” (in Stamm 1997, 300-01)

<sup>2</sup> “*Un dann hat er erzählt vom Krieg, wie’s war, un der hat er g’sagt, er muß immer an sein Vatter denke -war aa’n Bäker- der hat g’sagt zu’m: Des eine musch der merke, bei jedem Krieg immer glei die richtige Fahn zun Fenstschter rauhänge- Des isch so typisch Elsässer, die wechsle, immer glei die richtige Fahn. Un der hat au glei g’sagt, wo’s fertich war: geh’ raus un häng die weiß Fahn raus. Wisse Se dei weiße Fahn bedeutet? Friede, net, mir sin friedlich*” (Stamm 1997, 301).

Hans in the Mosquito-hole has all that he wants.  
And what he has, he doesn't want,  
And what he wants, he doesn't have.

Hans in the Mosquito-hole has all that he wants. (Harvey 2001, 205)

This song was so closely identified with Alsatian identity that it was used by the Russian army on the Eastern Front as a signal to conscripted Alsatians waiting to defect from the *Wehrmacht* (Graff 1996, 84).

Taken together, this would point to a well integrated social polity whose identity remains rooted in the region and that tacitly accepts a certain measure of reluctant collaboration, or at least capitulation, in order to protect local interests in times of crisis. Pétain might have been comfortable in this Alsace. Like Ashis Nandy's Indian Babu, a figure who absorbed other cultures into his Hindu identity in order to avoid any real change, Alsatians have the ability to adapt to the demands of power in order to survive as an intact cultural unit (see Nandy 1983). However, in reality, this version of identity rests uneasily on Alsatians, particularly in the context of their relationship with both France and Germany in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Alsace has not been populated by a separate border people caught between two foreign powers, but is rather characterised by a population that is a linguistic, ethnic and political mixture of the two. The heterogeneous nature of Alsace has had a profound impact on both Alsatian identity and blurred the line between collaboration, patriotism and normal cultural practise at any given time.

The possession of Alsace nominally passed to Louis XIV during the Thirty Years War. However, the Sun King experienced considerable difficulty administering the region, which was only brought to heel after an extensive siege of Strasbourg that ended in 1681 (Kahn 1990, 27). Despite efforts to centralize both the administration and culture of Alsace, the new territory remained a strangely mixed population divided along confessional, linguistic and cultural lines. By the mid-nineteenth century 32% of the population of Bas-Rhin and 11% of Haut-Rhin were protestant, while the region also supported a substantial Jewish minority (Harp 1998, 27; Kahn 1990, 46). At the same time, a majority of the population spoke German or a closely related Alsatian dialect as a first language while only the nobility and bourgeoisie of the cities were raised primarily in French (Philipps 1980, 25).

Linguistic and religious differences also combined in strange ways in Alsace. While the French speaking bourgeoisie were generally Protestants integrated into the Lutheran church, German speaking workers were predominantly Catholic and maintained ties to French ecclesiastical structures. Alsace thus came to be seen as a linguistically fractured region whose population demonstrated a love of French politics and German culture (Kahn 1990, 28). Like Nandy's Babu, this divided population of Alsace provided a deep reservoir of potential collaborators for both Germany and France. This duality allowed individuals and social groups to move between both regions with relative ease.

This dual identity was cause for concern for political figures from the French interior from the revolutionary Bertrand Barère to Napoleon III. Barère in particular explicitly identified Alsatians as potential collaborators with their "brothers" in Prussia and advocated the forcible imposition of French culture and language in the region (Harp 1998, 27). This fear seemed to be

confirmed in the eyes of the administrators of the Second Empire as support for Napoleon III's last plebiscite in 1870 declined substantially in Alsace and a wave of strikes swept the region, particularly Colmar, on the eve of the Franco-Prussian war (Silverman 1972, 20-21). As the Prussian troops advanced, violent outbursts increased in the region. While the Second Empire was entering its death-throes, municipal authorities in Colmar and Mulhouse formed volunteer corps to restore order at home in Alsace, rather than to meet the invading Prussians (*ibid.*, 22). Excited by the prospect of unification and ideas linking ethnicity, culture and nationhood, Prussian and North German nationalists took this to be evidence of the "German" nature of the region and hoped to incorporate Alsace into the new Reich with little difficulty.

However, the German Imperial government soon found itself entangled in the contradictory identity of Alsace. When, despite being occupied by Prussian troops, Alsatians were allowed to participate in the National Assembly elections immediately following the armistice of 1871, the region overwhelmingly endorsed Léon Gambetta and his call to renew the war against Prussia (Silverman 1972, 25). Thereafter, the German government treated the region with some caution. When Alsace and Lorraine were both eventually incorporated into the German constitution in 1874, they entered as subordinate regions directly administered by the Prussian government (Kahn 1990, 30). Despite the subordinate position of the region, the Reich government did not actively attempt to purge Alsace of its French population. This was left up to the effects of time and the allure of German culture (Harvey 1999, 540). Residents wishing to retain French citizenship, however, were required both to make an open declaration of their intention and to relocate across the new border by October 1, 1872 (Silverman 1972, 66). Fleeing French citizens were quickly replaced by a wave of German born administrators and migrants until, by 1910, approximately 123 out of every 1000 inhabitants of Alsace-Lorraine were born in the German interior (*ibid.*, 69). This was increased by the presence of an unusually large military garrison in the region which accounted for 4.4% of the population. Thus, by 1879, 95% of the population of Lower-Alsace and 78% of that of Upper-Alsace spoke German or dialect as a first language. In contrast, less than 5% of the population Alsace as a whole primarily spoke French (*ibid.*, 75).

Although the Reich government was relatively uninterested in the French speaking population of Alsace, it did actively encourage integration into the Reich through its education policies, military conscription and an administration that was wholly dependent on the German interior. As early as April 14, 1871, the Imperial government issued a directive that prohibited the use of French as a language of instruction in the primary grades (*ibid.*, 76). In 1874 this policy was extended to the elementary level in general and finally to the *Gymnasium*. On May first and second 1872, a new German university was inaugurated in Strasbourg (Craig 1984, 61). At best, the new University of Strasbourg was intended to help spread German learning and culture throughout the new territories. On a more practical level, the institution would allow the new administration to prepare Alsatians for a range of professions in which they would operate in German (*ibid.*, 30-60). In practice, however, the education system was much less demanding than it appeared. Many regions with predominantly French populations continued to educate their children in French, while both French and German were routinely taught. Many professional fields became functionally bilingual and technical terms were often expressed using both their French and German equivalents (Silverman 1972, 76-77). Moreover, the German government expressed little interest in the ethnicity or convictions of Alsatian teachers and



retained the French educators of the Second Empire (Harp 1998, 55).

The relationship between Alsatians and both the German military and administration was rather less ambivalent. As new citizens of the Reich, Alsatians were now expected to serve in that great school of the nation, the Imperial army. Despite suspicions regarding the reliability of troops conscripted from the new territories, compulsory service was introduced to Alsace-Lorraine the same day the option for emigration to France expired (Silverman 1972, 71). However, these troops were generally stationed far away from home in the Reich's eastern provinces, and even volunteer Alsatians could not expect to advance into the fabled Prussian officer corps (Harvey 1999, 538). The administration of the *Reichsland* was equally restrictive. With the exception of Secretary of State Zorn von Bulach, no Alsatian was permitted to serve in a responsible position in the administration of the region (Silverman 1972, 79). Even the potential appointment of the Strasbourg industrialist Jean Schlumberger, honoured twice for his service to the Kaiser, was rejected in 1885 as a "dangerous concession" to Alsatian ambitions (ibid., 84). The upper echelons of the civil service were likewise staffed by Germans from the interior and were closed to locals (Harvey 1999, 538).

While some Alsatians, particularly members of the "League of Alsace", protested during the initial stages of Prussian administration, the region soon began to adapt to its new circumstances. The proportion of conscript soldiers who failed to turn up for duty in Alsace-Lorraine dropped from 25% in 1879 to 8% in 1904, a figure comparable to some areas of central Germany (Silverman 1972, 72). At the same time, the education system and new university prepared Alsatians to work in German and created a corps of civil servants and technical elites who functioned exclusively in the language of the Reich (Grünwald 1984, 55). This effectively inverted the pre-1871 hierarchy (Essig 1994, 128). Whereas a minority of French speakers had once dominated Alsatian society through their connections to effective authority in the interior, opportunities for collaboration opened up for German and German speaking Alsatians under the auspices of the nascent German Empire. With the introduction of a more liberal constitution for the region in 1911, both Alsace and Lorraine seemed to be moving closer into the Reich (Silverman 1972, 151). While émigrés and French Alsatians might nurse bitter memories of the effects of the Franco-Prussian war, they now watched as a largely pacified and increasingly German Alsace sank into a complacent "*paix du cimetiere*" during the last decades of the nineteenth century (Kahn 1991, 31; Anderson 1972, 19).

Thus, while the German occupation of Alsace shifted opportunities from French to German speaking Alsatians, collaboration largely took the form of the speedy adaptation to a new centre of authority. As long as things went reasonably well under the German administration, Alsatians seemed largely content to work for improvements rather than fundamental change. However, as the German occupation grew more onerous, the Reich found it difficult to maintain its position in Alsace.

## 2. 1914-1944: Diminishing returns

The advent of the First World War had a profound impact on the population of Alsace. While the war helped to bolster the hopes of both regional autonomists and French sympathists, it also aroused deep suspicions on the part of the German Imperial government. Faced with an ongoing war on its western borders, the German government now feared that Alsace would act as a fifth column for the interests of the French. Therefore, while the German army mobilized over 380 000 Alsatians during the conflict, it also placed the two territories under direct military authority (Boswell 2000, 132). Lenient policies towards French speakers were suspended and the use of the language was banned in public places. “Strict Censorship” was introduced and freedom of movement was suspended (ibid.). While these provisions generally held true in the rest of the Reich as well, the peculiar linguistic mixture that characterized the Alsatian population made them particularly problematic. Contact, or even sympathy, with France became a punishable offence and several thousand inhabitants of the two regions were arrested as a wave of denunciations swept Alsace and Lorraine (Harvey 1999, 538). While the denunciation of neighbours might indicate a certain amount of sympathy for the German cause, or at least a willingness to settle old scores through the regime, support for the Reich plummeted over the course of the war (Boswell 2000, 133).

At the same time, support for regional autonomy grew. As the Imperial government collapsed into chaos in November of 1918, an *ad hoc* committee of three made a serious attempt to establish an independent republic in Alsace (Grünwald 1984, 47-49). However, as the victorious *poilus* crossed the Moselle, they were greeted by an enthusiastic and, by all accounts, suddenly Francophile population (Harvey 2001, 127; Beyer 1995, 42, 49). When the invading power began establishing its own authority, Alsace was gripped by a wave of purges of the former German “collaborators”. As in 1871, the occupation by a new power altered the relationship and relative position of Alsace’s two linguistic groups. However, this reorganization was decidedly more bitter and thorough than its predecessors.

While the French troops advanced, Francophone Alsatians that had been excluded from power under the old regime quickly set about settling the score with local collaborators. Following the armistice, an Alsatian *comité d’épuration* was established in Strasbourg in order to “purge Alsace of the *boches* who deserve it” (Boswell 2000, 140). However, despite the enthusiasm of some Francophile members of the local population, the French government itself quickly assumed responsibility for the purge of those associated too closely with the German regime. Like the German government, the French administration was deeply suspicious of the populations of Alsace-Lorraine during the war and had in fact interned a number of émigrés and up to 8000 Alsatians from parts of the region that had been briefly re-occupied by French troops in the confusion of the opening days of the war (Boswell 2000, 133). Their suspicions were underscored by the fact that, by 1918, only 2% of the population spoke French fluently (Anderson 1972, 20). The French government was therefore committed to aggressively reintegrating the two regions into the republic as loyal French provinces. Accordingly, a committee charged with establishing the ethnicity of each inhabitant and expelling undesirables was created under the forbidding title of “*Commissions de Triage*” in November 1918 (Grünwald 1984, 20).

The commissions represented both the new opportunities for collaboration with the French and the increasing tendency of national governments to classify the inhabitants of Alsace according to race or ethnicity. The commissions themselves were made up of three members; one presiding French general and two local Alsatians (Harvey 1999, 542). One of the local members of the commission was appointed by the government in Paris, while the other was named by the local military administrator. In practice, this meant that Alsatians with close ties to either the French interior or the new military presence presided alongside a French officer who often spoke no German (Boswell 2000, 145-46). The commissions were immediately “overwhelmed by a wave of denunciations” and the effects of the previous collaboration with the German government became apparent (Harvey 1999, 542). Those accused of harbouring pro-German sentiments, including Alsatians who had denounced others to the German government during the war, “pangermanists” or those who demonstrated “Germanophilia,” were then summoned “to answer for anti-French acts” and faced expulsion from the region, internment or the loss of a number of civil rights (Grünwald 1984, 21; Boswell 2000, 147, 150). Defendants were allowed no access to legal council and were not permitted to summon witnesses to speak on their behalf. Apart from those accused of directly collaborating with the German authorities, the commissions also targeted important or influential figures from the previous regime. Civil servants, priests and teachers in particular were relieved of their duties and often expelled outright (Boswell 2000, 152). The post-war purge also furnished an excuse to remove a variety of groups determined to be undesirable by the new administration. Labour leaders, “women of easy virtue” and even Alsatian autonomists were targeted by the *Commission de Triage* (Harvey 1999, 547). More than 4 300 cases were examined by the Strasbourg commissions alone between 1918-1919 (Boswell 2000, 147-48).

The post-war purges were underscored by French efforts to assign every Alsatian an identity card establishing their ethnic descent. “Pure” Alsatian citizens and émigrés from the French interior were issued “A” cards, while residents with at least one Alsatian parent were given “B” cards. Alsatians born as a result of the union between two foreign parents received “C” cards. At the very bottom of the new social hierarchy, Alsatians with two German parents were issued “D” cards (Harvey 1999, 548). While identity cards did not confer or deny citizenship in the Third Republic, “A”, “B” and even “C” cards conveyed considerable advantages over “D” card holders. Employers in Alsace were actively encouraged to dismiss “D” card holders, or at the very least to avoid hiring German-Alsatians. These individuals were also required to exchange their Marks for Francs at an inflated rate as compared to “A” through “C” card holders (ibid., 549). At the same time, “D” card holders were prevented from registering to vote, effectively disenfranchising residents of German descent (Boswell 2000, 144). In the context of the activities of the *Commissions de Triage*, the introduction of the identity card system seemed to be an ominous indication of the future for German-Alsatians.

As a result of the purges, over 150 000 Germans left or were expelled from Alsace-Lorraine (Grünwald 1984, 57). While those who left voluntarily fared better than the expelled Germans, those fleeing across the Rhine were officially only permitted to transport 2000 Marks, 30kgs of goods and sufficient provisions for the journey (ibid., 55). Once inside Germany, the refugees were forced to rely on aid agencies and self-help organizations, particularly the “*Hilfsbund für die vertriebenen Elsaß-Lothringer im Reich*” (ibid., 60). While these organizations served to integrate former Alsatian Germans into the young republic, they also

helped to cultivate bitter feelings towards France that would bear terrible fruit in the future.<sup>3</sup>

The situation in Alsace itself remained rather ambiguous. French administrators from the interior and émigrés who had fled in 1871-2 flooded in to fill the positions vacated by the Germans, infuriating many Alsatians by behaving “with the arrogance of colonial officials” while also collecting handsome salary bonuses for having relocated to the region (Anderson 1972, 20). German speaking civil servants and teachers were largely replaced by French Alsatians or appointees from the interior (Harp 1998, 188-89). A new generation of Alsatians was to be raised in French. Accordingly, in 1919 schools were required to teach in French for 50% of the week and classes were to be conducted entirely in French by the fall of 1920 (ibid., 191). On December 7 1918, the German university in Strasbourg was closed, only to reopen one month later as a French institution (Craig 1984, 108-110).

For many Alsatians, the shine soon wore off the Third Republic. Administrative and educational changes proved to be disorienting at best, a “lost generation” of bureaucrats and administrators from the old regime were unable to secure comparable employment and many Alsatians actively condemned the heavy-handedness of the post-war purges (Boswell 2000, 159). Moreover, local residents soon learned that their opportunities for advancement under the Third Republic were as limited as those under the Second Reich (Harvey 2001, 144). As a result, the government in Paris grew increasingly alarmed at the “Alsatian malaise” which reflected the provinces disappointment with the French administration (Anderson 1972, 20). Nevertheless, French-Alsatians were able to step into the places of former German speaking collaborators and reap the rewards of a close association with power. At the same time, Alsatians in general could look east and be thankful that the fortunes of war had delivered them from the political and economic quagmire into which the young Weimar republic was visibly sinking. However, the uneasy peace between Paris and Alsace was shattered by the election of a new government in 1924.

For Alsatians, the election of the *Cartel des Gauches* and establishment of the government of Eduard Herriot was as divisive as the government of Léon Blum would be in the rest of France some eight years later. Committed to fully integrating Alsace into a secular, unitary French state, Herriot announced on June 17 1924 that his government would eliminate the last of the special laws obtaining in Alsace. As a result, the province would be subject to all French laws and the Napoleonic Concordat of 1801, which still governed the relationship between church and state in Alsace, would be abolished (Kettenacker 1973, 15). Catholic Alsatians in particular were outraged by Herriot’s intention and 17 000 protesters turned out in Strasbourg alone to denounce the *Cartel* on July 20 (Bankwitz 1978, 14). Although the *Cartel des Gauches* was forced to abandon the project in January 1925, the controversy surrounding the proposal had alienated a wide variety of Alsatians and emboldened autonomists and German-

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<sup>3</sup> This is particularly true in the case of Valentin Beyer, whose memories of the French occupation and his own exile became coloured by national socialist ideology in the 1930s. His memoirs thus present a fascinating example of the relationship between ideology, memory and identity. Because the book is largely concerned with Beyer’s later writing and is heavily glossed by his grandson, most of the text represents a troubled meditation on the significance of Beyer as the head of a family and representative of the Nazi period. (Beyer 1995, 42)

Alsations dissatisfied with the new regime (ibid., 15).

The following year, this widespread dissatisfaction began to develop into an autonomist movement with close ties to Germany. On May 9 1925, the newspaper “*Die Zukunft*” (The Future) was founded in order to promote the interests of the region (*Heimat*) and the traditional rights of its inhabitants (*volksrechte*) (Kettenacker 1973, 16). By the end of the year, *Zukunft* was read by one in twelve households in Alsace (Bankwitz 1978, 16). In September of 1925, the regional Communist Party officially endorsed the autonomist movement in Alsace (Kettenacker 1973, 16). This was quickly followed by the establishment of an *Elsaß-Lothringisches Heimatbundes* in 1926 (ibid.). The *Heimatbund* in turn supported two separate autonomist parties: the moderate *Elsaßische Fortschrittspartei* (Alsatian Progressive Party) and the more radical *Landespartei* (Bankwitz 1978, 18). By 1928, three Alsatian autonomists sat in the French National Assembly (Anderson 1972, 22).

This new movement was not simply an expression of dissatisfaction with the policies of the *Cartel des Gauches*. Rather, the autonomists of the mid-1920s identified themselves explicitly with the old Reich and developed a discourse that linked the Alsatian *Heimat* to irredentist Germany and cultivated resentment towards French efforts to re-orient Alsatian culture and society towards Paris. The manifesto of the *Heimatbund* in particular identified the Alsations to whom it appealed as belonging to a separate race as well as language.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the movement was largely financed from the east bank of the Rhine. The *Hilfsbund* in particular had quickly transformed itself from a mutual aid society into a political organization representing German interests in Alsace on both sides of the border (Grünwald 1984, 99). By early 1924, it employed Robert Ernst, an embittered ex-patriot who had fled Alsace with his family in 1918 and nursed dreams of an eventual reunification with Germany, to establish a relationship between the *Hilfsbund* and the autonomist movement (Kettenacker 1973, 76; Grünwald 1984, 101). It was Ernst who secured the funds necessary for the establishment of *Die Zukunft* and the *Heimatbund* (Bankwitz 1978, 21). At the same time, German émigrés and the *Hilfsbund* re-established connections with local and municipal governments in Alsace in order to offer their services in the “reconstruction of our German Fatherland”.<sup>5</sup>

The French government was now sufficiently unnerved by the prospect of a German fifth column that Paris began to crackdown on autonomist activities. Autonomist newspapers were outlawed in the region in November 1927 and French authorities arrested twenty-four leaders of the movement on the following Christmas eve (Bankwitz 1978, 25). Four of the accused were convicted for subversion, sentenced to one year in prison and expelled from the region for a further five. However, sympathetic Alsations rallied around the autonomist leaders and two of the convicted men, Joseph Rossé and Georges Ricklin, were elected to the National Assembly in the spring (ibid., 26). Although they were prevented from sitting in the assembly, their election sent a powerful message both to the government in the interior and Germans waiting across the Rhine.

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<sup>4</sup> “Appeal to all Alsace-Lorrainers faithful to their homeland” (in Bankwitz 1978, 16-18)

<sup>5</sup> “An die Stadtverwaltung der Stadt Restatt. Z.H. des Herrn Oberbürgermeister Renner. Dez. 1927.” (in Stamm 1997, 152)

While the autonomist movement was underwritten by dissatisfied German-Alsatians and their supporters in the Reich, the rise of the National Socialists as a viable political movement and then governing party split the autonomist movement and created a small cadre willing to collaborate with an aggressive German Reich. Although many were initially drawn to the dynamic progress made by the Nazis in Germany, moderate autonomists, particularly those associated with the Catholic church, soon distanced themselves from the pro-German movement and embraced regional rights within a strong French republic (Harvey 2001, 167). Others, including the former editor of *Die Zukunft*, Robert Schall, openly endorsed the political and racial ideology of the Nazi party and continued to advocate for strong ties with Germany (ibid.). In 1931, an *Elsaß-Lothringische Jungmannschaft*, modelled on the growing Nazi *volkische* and youth movements, was formed with the support of pro-German fraternities at the University of Strasbourg (Craig 1984, 302). By the mid-1930s, the clash between right wing organizations such as the *Croix de Feu* and the left wing Popular Front government likewise polarised politics in Alsace, driving many German speaking Alsatians into the fascist *Elsäßische Arbeiter und Bauern Partei* (Alsatian Workers and Farmers Party) (Harvey 2001, 173-176). As refugees from the third Reich began to enter and settle in Alsace, an increasing number of right-wing Alsatians began to protest the number of Jews and other “undesirables” being allowed into the region (ibid., 171).

When the relationship between France and Germany deteriorated, the French government once again took measures to contain the internal threat in Alsace. In February 1939 one of the leaders of the *Landespartei*, Karl Roos, was arrested and imprisoned. In the weeks immediately following the declaration of war on Germany, fifteen other autonomist leaders were arrested and held in the city of Nancy (Bankwitz 1978, 34). However, in their haste to prevent discontented Alsatians from aiding Germany, the French authorities conflated real German agents like Roos and Friedrich Spieser with local fascists such as the head of the *Junmannschaft*, Herman Bickler, and the mercurial autonomist Rossé, who now sat as a deputy for the *Union Populaire Républicain* along with René Stürmel (ibid., 37-66). The group’s arrest and the subsequent execution of Roos underlined the seriousness of the situation and turned the “*Nanziger*” as a group into a minor *cause celebre* in Nazi circles (Kattenacker 1973, 128). Together, this group would constitute the public face of Alsatian collaboration during the war.

Following the successful invasion of France, the Nazi government demanded the return of the *Nanziger* to Alsace. On July 17, one month after Petain had made a “gift of his person” to the nation, the fifteen prisoners were returned to Alsace (Harvey 2001, 195). However, before they returned to their homes, the former prisoners were pressured into signing a joint declaration publicly condemning the French government and calling for the full integration of Alsace into the Third Reich (Bankwitz 1978, 69-70). Thereafter, members of the group were shuffled into visible positions in the new National Socialist administration. Four of the former *Nanziger* (Lang, Hauss, Bickler, and Nußbaum) were appointed *Kreisleiter* of Zabern, Hagenau, Strasbourg and Molsheim, respectively (Kettenacker 1973, 126). The remaining members found employment in important positions in the semi-official *Elsäßischer Hilfsdienst*, founded by Robert Ernst upon his return to Alsace (Bankwitz 1978, 77). A number of other prominent pre-war figures were also integrated into the new governing structure. Ernst himself was made chief advisor to the new *Gauleiter*, Robert Wagner (Harvey 2001, 194). *Kreisleiter* positions in Mülhausen, Gebweiler and Rappoltsweiler were likewise filled by former members of the

*Jungmannschaft* and the *Arbeiter und Bauern Partei* (Kettenacker 1973, 126). These, however, were only the most visible Alsatians willing to work under the new regime. The *Hilfdienst* in particular was able to find work for a wide variety of German-Alsatians (ibid., 116). By the end of the war, 30 000 Alsatians had joined the NSDAP and 63% of the population was member of at least one Nazi organization (Graff 1996, 91).

In the early days of the occupation, the population of Alsace began to adapt as they had after conflicts twice before in living memory. Like French citizens all over occupied France, Alsatians were relieved to discover that the German troops, from whom they expected terrible acts of brutality, were in fact well disciplined, clean and orderly young men.<sup>6</sup> This revelation was particularly poignant to the refugees returning after having been evacuated from Strasbourg and the areas surrounding the Maginot Line. These families returned to Alsace to discover that their homes and wine cellars had been plundered by unruly French, rather than German, troops while their livestock was requisitioned without compensation by the French high command (Boswell 1999, 561-62). Many of these Alsatians were at least thankful for a swift end to the war and a return to their homes.

The German invasion of 1940 thus repeated the pattern set for Alsace in 1871 and 1918. The social hierarchy was once again inverted and collaborators connected to the new site of power were integrated into the new administration. Schools and the civil service again functioned in the language of the victor and the creatures of the old regime were expelled. However, the National Socialist government was of an entirely different order than that of previous invading powers. Ethnically or politically undesirable Alsatians were sometimes exiled into France, but they were also often sent into the German interior or into concentration camps. Use of the French language was banned outright as the government attempted to stamp out the remains of the previous regime (Essig 1994, 146). Francophone civil servants were seized as hostages to ensure the safety of the region's new masters (Ungerer 1998, 32). The distasteful French policy of classifying Alsatians according to ethnicity found a terrible echo in the imposition of National Socialist racial policies in 1940.

Alsatians themselves also seem to have developed a reputation as opportunists and collaborators over the course of the previous two regime changes. The Alsatians historical ability to come to terms with their most recent invaders met with a cool reception amongst a Nazi leadership who considered most Alsatians to be little more than crass opportunists (Bankwitz 1978, 74; Robert Ernst in Stamm 1997, 268-69). Alsatians were therefore barred even from positions of relatively little importance such as local police forces (Ungerer 1998, 60). As a result, the full weight of the National Socialist State was brought to bear on Alsace, undermining the Alsatian rationale for collaboration.

Although Alsace was not publically annexed to the Reich, an unpublished decree of August 2, 1940 officially extended the German administration into the region (Milward 1970, 39). Gauleiter Wagner, a comrade of Hitler's since the Beer-hall putsch of 1923, was charged with fully assimilating Alsace-Lorraine into the Third Reich within ten years. Wagner himself

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the French reaction to German troops see Burrin 1993, 197. For the Alsatian reaction see Ungerer 1998, 30-31.

was determined to expunge all cultural and linguistic peculiarities from the region ahead of schedule (Kettenacker 1973, 62). Education was therefore made little more than indoctrination into National Socialism and young people were uniformly drafted into a variety of Nazi youth organizations (Ungerer 1998, 60-64). Even minor cultural differences were not tolerated, and Alsatians were pressured to switch their wedding rings to their right hand after the German custom (*ibid.*, 58). The Concordat of 1801 was finally abolished in 1940, and the new regime began a policy of repression of Catholicism as an “enemy of the Reich” (Kettenacker 1973, 197). As new citizens of the Reich, young Alsatians were required to perform at least one year of compulsory labour service after May 1941 (Harvey 2001, 195). On August 23 1942, compulsory military service was introduced to the region (Kettenacker 1973, 223). As a result, 130 000 Alsatians were sent to the eastern front, where 40 000 perished or disappeared (Graff 1996, 76). While the Allied armies approached Alsace in the summer of 1944, virtually the entire population was inducted into the German Labour corps in order to prepare the region’s defences (Wurch 1973, 194).

### **3. Post-war years: Identity out of the ashes**

As the reality of the situation revealed itself, it became apparent that this occupation was substantially different from its predecessors. The region’s population and resources were being consumed by a nation which demonstrated a surprising commitment to obliterating regional identity. In this context, it is often asserted that “Hitler did more for the cause of the French state than all the “patriots” taken together” (Anderson 1972, 23). While it is true that the war drove Alsatians into the arms of the French, this also involved a profound redefinition of the relationship between Alsace and any outside power. In this context, the relationship between the two competing linguistic groups in Alsace changed fundamentally as Alsatians attempted to sever or downplay ties to Germany. Alsace did not experience the purges that wracked the interior of France or the majority of liberated states in the closing days of the war. Rather, Alsatians developed a unique approach to the war years that focussed on the totalizing effects of victimhood at the hands of a totally foreign power. Opportunities for collaboration and the close ties between Germany and Alsace itself were therefore minimized, or turned into acts of resistance. This approach hardened into a surprisingly durable discourse through the controversy surrounding the massacre at Oradour in particular which allowed Alsace to integrate itself into French society and avoid some of the contemporary implications of its collaborationist past.

The Alsatian understanding of the wartime experience is largely dependant on its illegitimate integration into the Third Reich. A wide variety of writers and historians, including the filmmaker and playwright Martin Graff, have based their discussion of the occupation on this point (Graff 1996, 178; see also Harvey 2001, 193). This has had several consequences for Alsatian memories of the war years. First, it established a clear distinction between the experiences of occupied France and that of annexed Alsace. At the same time, it distinguished Alsatians from Germans of the same period. This median position allowed Alsatians to claim (with some justification) that they, unlike the collaborators of Vichy, were forced to serve the Nazi State while also avoiding the guilt associated with full participation in the Third Reich. Alsatians experienced National Socialism as victims, without contributing to it. This effectively precluded widespread resistance and removed the voluntary aspects of collaboration. This later



argument formed a substantial part of the defence of the Alsatians charged with participation in the massacre at Oradour (Farmer 1999, 151). At the same time, this position papered over the competition between French and German speaking Alsatians.

Alsations' approach to collaboration during and following the war is consistent with this model of totalizing victimhood. Thus, actions which might have been considered acts of collaboration in the French interior have been transformed into acts of necessity or minor acts of resistance in Alsace. When Tomi Ungerer describes his beautiful mother's ability to trade her attentions and flattery for extraordinary privileges, he uses this as an example of both the stupidity of the Nazi officers in question and of Alsations ability to manipulate the occupying authorities (Ungerer 1998, 36, 105-06). As a result, Alsace was not swept by a wave of riotous unofficial purges following liberation. Many Alsatians in fact expressed their concern at the tendency of the French army to arrest "good Alsatian citizens" on charges of collaboration (Wurch 1973, 200).

The region proved to be equally indulgent during the period of the post war trials and was more sympathetic to collaborators who claimed to have shielded Alsatians during the Nazi period than inhabitants of the interior (Anderson 1972, 23). The increasingly debauched former *kreisleiter* of Mülhause, Jean-Pierre Mourer, was executed in 1947. However, the evidence brought against him primarily concerned his relationship with the German government before hostilities broke out and served to conclude his pre-war Nancy trial (Bankwitz 1978, 106). Rossé, Stürmel and Ernst also seemed to be in line for execution, but the courts acceptance of the special circumstances in Alsace resulted in commuted sentences. Rossé, who had rewarded himself handsomely during the war as the head of the *Hilfdienst* indemnification board, was stripped of his possessions and sentenced to fifteen years in prison, where he died after having served four years (*ibid.*, 107-08). Stürmel was sentenced to eight years in prison, but was released six years later following the general amnesty bill of 1953 (*ibid.*, 109). Due to his questionable legal citizenship, Ernst was not tried until 1955. When he was finally sentenced to eight years in prison as a French citizen and collaborator, the years he had spent awaiting trial were taken into account and he was released, ironically, into Germany (*ibid.*, 111).

This developing consensus on the Alsatian wartime experience was forged into a remarkably powerful discourse by the Oradour trial at Bordeaux trial in 1953. For the survivors of the Oradour massacres and a wide cross-section of French society, the trial of 21 members of the *SS Das Reich* division responsible for the event under the "collective responsibility" provision of 1948 was the long delayed retribution for an exceptionally brutal act (Rouso 1991, 55-56; Kruuse 1967, 146). This was to be a "trial of Nazism" (Farmer 1999, 139). However, for Alsatians, the trial of 14 SS-men from Alsace alongside former German troops was regarded as a trial of wartime Alsace (Wurch 1973, 339). As a result of the controversy surrounding the trial, the collective memory of Alsatians was parlayed into a public statement on the nature of the relationship between Alsace and Germany.

The fourteen Alsatian defendants exemplified the variety of relationships possible between Alsatians and the German administration during the war. Two of the accused had voluntarily joined the *Waffen SS* and might therefore be considered genuine collaborators. However, the thirteen remaining troops had been drafted directly into the German army, or had

graduated from the compulsory *Hitler Jugend* into the SS. Two of the men had served in the French army before the defeat in 1940 while five defected to the Free French in Normandy after the massacre at Oradour (Kruuse 1967, 117-34). The case of Joseph Busch in particular exemplifies the complexities of the Alsatian war experience. Busch was transferred from the Hitler Youth to the SS as a teenager in February 1944. Five months later he found himself at Oradour. Of all the defendants present at the trial, including the former German troops, Busch was the most candid about his activities on June 10, 1944. He admitted to having shot at least two civilians whom he later burned to death and to having stood guard over the women and children held in Oradour's church shortly before it was put to the torch. Busch later agreed with the court president's description of him as "a machine, like a mechanism that someone else operates" (Kruuse 1967, 125). However, less than one month after the incident, this "machine" deserted to join the French army in Normandy. After the war, he returned home to Alsace where he lived quietly as a bricklayer until summoned before the court (*ibid.*, 125-26). This experience is difficult to reconcile comfortably with any one narrative of collaboration or resistance during the war years.

Despite the obvious variety of experience amongst the accused, Alsatians rallied to their cause, which was then taken to exemplify that of Alsace itself. The former soldiers were quickly integrated into the prevailing Alsatian discourse regarding the war. They, and the other 130 000 Alsatians who had served in the German army were consistently portrayed as the "*malgré-nous*" or "*incorporés de force*" in French and the "*Zwangsrecrutierten*" (forced recruits) in German (Farmer 1999, 144; Graff 1996, 76). At the same time, the *Zwangsrecrutierten* were conflated with those who had managed to evade or escape inclusion in the German army in a catch-all Alsatian veterans association, "*l'Association des Evadés et Incorporés de Force*" (Farmer 1999, 143). In a more difficult leap, Alsatians further identified the wartime experience of the *Zwangsrecrutierten* with that of Alsace in general (Wurch 1973, 341; Graff 1996, 91; Essig 1994, 147). The thirteen impressed Alsatians were thus elevated as representations of the limited choices of all Alsatians during the war while citizens in the interior saw them as the worst kind of collaborators. For Alsatians, to condemn the *Zwangsrecrutierten* would be to effectively condemn Alsatian conduct during the war and the Alsatian post-war consensus. As a result, the province pressured the government in Paris to exonerate the *malgré-nous* and avoid raising the question of Alsatian wartime collaboration (Farmer 1999, 143).

The indignant reaction to the trial in Alsace achieved a number of results in Paris and Bordeaux. In January 1953 the trial and sentencing of the Alsatians was severed from that of the German defendants, confirming some of the distinctions made in the Alsatian post-war discourse (Rouso 1991, 57). When the sentences were finally passed on February 12, the court was lenient towards the *malgré-nous*. Boos, the lone volunteer, was condemned to death. However, the rest of the Alsatians were given sentences ranging from five to eight years in prison (Kruuse 1967, 168). While much of France was shocked by the leniency of the court, Alsace was indignant (Farmer 1999, 158). Flags in the region were lowered to half-mast, municipal officials addressed protesting crowds and a special Mass was held at the Strasbourg Cathedral in which the Bishop condemned the verdict (Kruuse 1967, 169). In an effort to placate the province and preserve national unity, the National Assembly passed a new amnesty bill two days after the verdict was read which exempted forced conscripts from prosecution under the collective responsibility laws. Four days later the *Zwangsrecrutierten* were on their way home to Alsace

(Rousso 1991, 57).

Both the Bordeaux trial and the subsequent amnesty bill were part of the larger French process of coming to terms with the war and occupation. This process had far reaching implications for Alsace which involved both the integration into the French republic and the redefinition of a long history of partisan collaboration. The Alsatian post-war memory broke the pattern of invasion and collaboration in the region. Instead, Alsatians created a discourse of victimhood that paralleled the Gaullist myth of *resistancialisme* and allowed the region to discard the history of collaboration that had haunted them for almost a century. Alsatians instead came to see themselves as the helpless victims of a powerful and criminal regime that had singled them out for assimilation. This not only helped them to come to terms with the particularly distasteful occupation of the Nazis, but also to set aside the internal conflict between French and German Alsatians. This discourse has survived the larger French controversy surrounding the experiences of the war. In 1981, 30 years of Alsatian lobbying succeeded in securing compensation from Germany for all Alsatians drafted into the *Wehrmacht* (Graff 1996, 89).

At the same time, Alsatians accepted an unprecedented level of integration into the French Republic. Many Alsatians were now uncomfortable sharing the “language of the Nazis” and accepted a return to predominantly French education (Essig 1994, 164-67). Autonomists and German parties vanished from post war Alsatian politics, which were now dominated by conflict between the Gaullists and the MRP (Anderson 1972, 24). To some Alsatians, this represented the death of their conflicted identity. Some bemoaned the fact that German culture and cuisine was voluntarily replaced in public life by a population eager to distance itself from all things German in the decades after the war.<sup>7</sup> Tomi Ungerer in particular saw all traces of both the German occupation and Alsatian peculiarity crushed under the steamroller of administration from Paris (Ungerer 1998, 230). Thus, as a result of this discourse of victimhood, Alsace shed its divided, partisan, identity and accepted integration into the culture and governing structure of the victorious power in a way that it had not after previous conflicts. In more recent years, Alsatians have begun to re-examine their relationship to their two powerful neighbours and question the decisions about language and culture made by their parents (Philipps 1980, 169). However, this debate has emerged in the context of a broader Europe and a cosmopolitan approach to language studies rather than a debate about the appeal of either a specifically French or German identity. In this sense, Alsace has entered the modern debate about the fate of small regions in a larger Europe rather than the power of nationality and ethnicity.

## Conclusion

The history of Alsace provides historians with an opportunity to examine collaboration both before and after the momentous effects of the Second World War. The Alsatian experience suggests that collaboration can be both a reasonable choice and the articulation of social and political conflicts within the occupied region. The divided linguistic and cultural identity of

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<sup>7</sup> Graff in particular notes the novelty of a restaurant in Alsace serving “German” food (Graff 1996, 196-8). See also Wenz 1992, 259 and Schreiber 1988, 340.

Alsace provided a pool of potential collaborators for both France and Germany in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Following an invasion or attempt at integration, collaborators allowed the new regime to extend its own influence quickly into Alsace. At the same time, the event created new opportunities for the formation of an elite class of collaborators and opened up the possibility of settling old scores with groups and individuals that had dominated the region under the last regime. While collaboration with an invading power might not have been Alsatians preferred course of action, it allowed the region to chart a course between two behemoths.

However, the detrimental effects of this adaptability increased with every regime change. Alsatians' willingness to collaborate increasingly raised the suspicions of each new regime. Purges of the old elite created a fund of bitterness which led to increasingly sharp reprisals when the region changed hands again. Thus, when France regained control of Alsace in 1918, the dispossessed pre-1871 French elite zealously purged the region of German collaborators. This in turn fostered the growth of an embittered future German collaborationist elite ready to turn the tables on French collaborators once more. At the very moment that the western world was falling victim to extremism of various kinds, collaboration in Alsace was rapidly developing into a zero-sum game. However, the enormous impact of the Nazi occupation and Second World War broke the Alsatian cycle of collaboration, purge and counter-collaboration and demanded a new conception of the relationship between the region and its invaders. As a result, Alsatians took refuge in a discourse of total victimhood and turned away from Germany. This allowed Alsatians to overlook many of the implications of their own collaborationist past in the years following the Second World War. However, it also demanded that Alsatians abandon the cultural and linguistic duality that had helped facilitate collaboration in the past and define themselves within the context of the French Republic.

Collaboration is a dangerous game. While it can allow a region to survive enormous political change, it also raises the stakes at home and in the minds of the occupying powers. The absence of a fixed identity that was sufficiently differentiated from either French or German culture blurred the lines between collaboration, patriotism and the normal process of making one's way in the world. However, Alsatians demonstrated adaptability fostered a well of bitterness that could be drawn on by both France and Germany at various times. This tendency made each regime change increasingly violent. When this tendency combined with the apocalyptic violence of the Second World War, this pattern became too much to bear. Alsatians not only re-defined their own culture by minimizing the role of German language and culture, but also defined "collaboration" out of existence in Alsace. This "act of will" on the part of Alsatians seems to have drawn the curtain on more than a century of divided loyalties. To some extent, the history of Alsace reflects the problems associated with the rise of nationalism in Europe. However, it also demonstrates both the ambiguities and dangers of national identity for a people caught between two great states.

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