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## **NATIONAL MEMORIES AT THE HEART OF EUROPE: RE-FRAMING THE LOCAL PAST IN STRASBOURG SINCE 1945**

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On 12 April 2022, between the two rounds of voting in the French presidential elections, Emmanuel Macron gave a speech in the shadow of Strasbourg cathedral, in which he declared his love for the city: “Strasbourg, Alsatian city, French city, European city, city of my heart, is one of the capitals of Europe! And yes, here, we know the meaning of the wounds [literally “bite marks”] when history takes a wrong turn”.<sup>1</sup> Such insistence on these three frameworks of identity – regional, national and European – as well as on Strasbourg’s symbolic status as a victim of “history” are typical of the way in which the city and its past have been commemorated since 1945. After decades of French-German conflict over Alsace, in which Strasbourg’s past had been mobilized in support of rival national claims and integrated into competing national narratives, the second half of the twentieth century saw Strasbourg forge a new role for itself as the symbolic site of post-war Franco-German reconciliation at the heart of an integrating Western Europe. In this context, the city’s contested past has been reinvented in ways which have reinforced Strasbourg’s status both as a cultural “crossroads” at the European centre and as a victim of modern conflicts on the national periphery.

Emmanuel Macron’s claim that Strasbourg can be both a French city and a “capital of Europe” reflects the fact that the Europeanization of Strasbourg’s past since 1945 has not fundamentally undermined French national claims to the city. Indeed, it has above all been those historical figures, sites and periods which had previously been central to German national and territorial claims which have been denationalized, either within the narrow framework of Alsatian regional heritage or within the expanded framework of the city’s European cultural heritage. Meanwhile, the core symbols and narratives of French patriotic memory in Strasbourg have rarely been challenged. Moreover, even though modern periods of German rule in the city from 1870 to 1918 and from 1940 to 1944 have been remembered with greater nuance in recent decades, core narratives of local suffering and resistance during these years have remained prominent, thus further reinforcing French patriotic memory in

the city. As such, even though Macron's reference to the city's status as a victim of "history" was expressed in typically neutral language, the public was expected to understand that the "bite marks" to which he referred have been left not only by national conflicts in general but, above all, by past German attempts to dominate Strasbourg.

### **The Politics of History and Memory in a Contested Borderland, 1870-1945**

Strasbourg's history has been shaped by its central location in the Rhine valley as well as its peripheral position between regions of Latin/French and Germanic culture. Founded by the Romans as the military camp of Argentoratum, the city came under the control of Alemannic tribes in the fourth century. It flourished as a commercial and cultural centre during the medieval period, gaining the status of a Free Imperial City within the Holy Roman Empire from the 1260s, and became an important centre of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. In 1681, during the reign of Louis XIV, this largely German-speaking and Protestant city was annexed by France, and Catholicism was re-imposed. The city then remained part of France for nearly two centuries, experiencing the profound political transformations of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras, the Restoration, the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848 and the Second Empire of Napoleon III. In September 1870, after a six-week-long siege and heavy bombardment, the city fell to the combined military forces of Prussia, Baden and Württemberg and subsequently became the administrative capital of the *Reichsland* of Elsass-Lothringen (Alsace-Lorraine) within the newly founded German Empire.

During the period of the German *Kaiserreich* from 1871 to 1918, the Alemannic linguistic and cultural heritage of Strasbourg (renamed Straßburg) and its flowering as a centre of German-speaking culture during the medieval period and Reformation were used by the authorities as a means of reinforcing German national claims to the city. At the inauguration of the city's new university buildings in 1884, for example, the university's rector Rudolf Sohm insisted that the cultural links between Strasbourg and Germany had never been broken, even during two centuries of French rule: "Here, where German folk and chivalric poetry once flourished, where German art made the wonderful cathedral soar high into the air, where in the 16th century the German Reformation triumphed and at the same time produced a German university, the connection with German intellectual life has never been broken."<sup>ii</sup> As this example suggests, German historical claims to the city focussed on the medieval period and Reformation, underlining their cultural achievements in purely national terms. In such a narrative, the French annexation of the city in 1681 was presented as a rapacious conquest, and the subsequent centuries of French rule as an unnatural, foreign imposition on the city's German-speaking population.

In opposition to a German definition of nationality based on language and culture, French intellectuals during this period formulated an alternative definition of the nation based on voluntary citizenship, one which reinforced French national claims to the borderland by emphasizing, above all, the transformative experience of the French Revolution.<sup>iii</sup> In a famous

response to Theodor Mommsen's claims regarding the German nationality of Alsace, the French historian Fustel de Coulanges argued in 1870 that nationality was not an objective category but something that "men feel in their hearts" insisting that "it may be that Alsace is German by race and by language, but by nationality and patriotic sentiment it is French. And do you know what made it French? It is not Louis XIV, but our Revolution of 1789".<sup>iv</sup> Similar arguments were put forward by Ernest Renan in his 1882 lecture "What is a Nation?" in which he argued that language and "race" were less important factors in creating national communities than "a heroic past, great men, glory, [...] having suffered, rejoiced and hoped together".<sup>v</sup> Such arguments regarding the French "sentiments" of the population were crucial when it came to maintaining French territorial claims to the "lost provinces" of Alsace-Lorraine after 1871 and in justifying their reconquest by France during the First World War.

After the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France in November 1918, French claims to Strasbourg were reasserted through a selective presentation of the local past dominated by the local figures and events which had tied Alsace to France from the seventeenth century to 1870.<sup>vi</sup> The enduring popularity of local heroes of the French Revolution and Empire was put forward as evidence that the city's French past had never been forgotten despite half a century of German rule. Most prominent among such local heroes was the revolutionary general Jean-Baptiste Kléber whose statue had stood on one of the city's main squares since 1840. This monument, according to the French President Raymond Poincaré in a speech given in Strasbourg in December 1918, had "silently represented, during the German occupation, the indomitable resistance of the people of Strasbourg". In the same speech Poincaré also insisted that Strasbourg had remained essentially unchanged in its national identity since 1790, when the city's inhabitants had "planted on the banks of the Rhine, facing Germany, the first tricolor flag with this inscription: 'Here begins the land of liberty'".<sup>vii</sup> Indeed, in the pronouncements of French politicians after 1918, the "liberty" of the Revolution and the "liberation" of 1918 were often presented as one and the same. Even the wars of Louis XIV in Alsace and the annexation of the city in 1681 were presented as a "first liberation", a claim that infuriated Alsatian regionalists.<sup>viii</sup> Heavy-handed French policies of centralization in the 1920s, particularly over matters of language, education and religion, led to the rise of several Alsatian regionalist and autonomist movements, which challenged the French patriotic version of regional history and sought to preserve aspects of Alsace's German cultural heritage.<sup>ix</sup>

While the entry of French troops into the city in 1918 was invariably presented in official celebrations as a "liberation", the wider commemoration of the First World War was a particularly problematic subject, given that the majority of the local male population had been mobilized in the armies of the German Empire during the First World War. Tense deliberations over the question of a municipal war memorial lasted for almost two decades before a monument was finally erected on the place de la République in 1936. This monument depicted three figures: a mother holding the naked bodies of her two dying sons in her arms, representing the two nations for which the city's sons had fought. The inscription, "To Our Dead", made no mention of nationality.<sup>x</sup> The memory of the war was therefore partially

denationalized, and above all de-Germanized, through the presentation of the city as a victim of national conflicts.

The annexation of Alsace by the Third Reich after the fall of France in June 1940 led to a further reinvention of the city at the centre of a National Socialist “Upper Rhine” region.<sup>xi</sup> A campaign of *Entwelschung* (literally “de-Latinization”) was undertaken in the city, which included the the renaming of streets and squares and the removal of the statue to General Kléber.<sup>xii</sup> During this period, Strasbourg’s medieval heritage was once again celebrated, the cathedral becoming the most regularly used symbol for the region’s German past.<sup>xiii</sup> Historical propaganda of various forms, including several exhibitions organized as part of a “year of historical education” in 1942, underlined the city’s supposed millennia-long struggle against French influence and its role as a cultural bulwark of the German nation, particularly during the Reformation.<sup>xiv</sup> National Socialist propaganda rejected the idea of a city’s dual cultural heritage, insisting instead that the French “hereditary enemy” (*Erbfeind*) had left only a thin veneer of superficial “civilization” on the surface of a profoundly German city.

### **French Patriotic Commemoration and the Contested Past since 1945**

The military defeat and occupation of Germany in 1945, as well as the renunciation of any territorial claims to Alsace by the post-war Federal Republic, made it possible for Strasbourg to be reinvented after 1945 as a symbol of reconciliation between former “hereditary enemies”. Crucially, this reinvention as the symbolic heart of post-war European integration did not call into question the French nationality of the city: French patriotic commemoration in fact continued after 1945 along similar lines to the interwar period, presenting France as the bringer both of political “liberty” in 1789 and of “liberation” from Germany in 1918 and 1944. While this historical narrative was occasionally challenged by Alsatian regionalists, German nationalist claims to the city all but disappeared since the experience of the Third Reich and Second World War. Despite tensions over the memory of this period, particularly concerning the military service of Alsatians in the Wehrmacht and Waffen SS during the Second World War, periods of German rule in Strasbourg from 1870 to 1918 and 1940 to 1944 have tended to be presented in ways that reinforce the idea of the border city as a victim, and therefore as a potent symbol of post-war *rapprochement*.

Following the return of Strasbourg to France in November 1944, the city’s liberators were frequently celebrated as the modern-day equivalents of the local heroes of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods. As had been the case in 1790 and in 1918, signs bearing the phrase “Here begins the land of liberty” were erected on the banks of the Rhine in 1945.<sup>xv</sup> On the first anniversary of the city’s liberation, the city’s mayor Charles Frey equated General Kléber, “the citizen-soldier of the armies of liberty” with the liberator of 1944 General Leclerc, “the young and bold general of the army of liberation”.<sup>xvi</sup> Taking such a historical comparison into even more problematic territory, at a ceremony in honour of General de Lattre de Tassigny in 1948, Charles Frey praised the modern-day liberator as the descendent of Marshall

Turenne, whose victories in the period of Louis XIV had secured the French possession of Alsace: “in the footsteps of the great Turenne [...] he, too, liberated Alsace from the oppression of a hereditary enemy”.<sup>xvii</sup> Given that even Fustel de Coulanges in the 1870s had argued that it had been the French Revolution, rather than Louis XIV, that had made Alsace French, such references to seventeenth century “liberation” were highly problematic. While a programme of festivities in 1948 to mark the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Alsace’s “union” with France passed without serious incident, the celebration, in 1981, of the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Strasbourg’s annexation by France generated heated debate, in spite of a very cautious, nuanced presentation of the events of 1681 in an exhibition by Strasbourg’s municipal museums.<sup>xviii</sup> Alongside much discussion in the regional press, the most striking challenge to the 1981 tercentenary celebrations was the destruction, by an extreme-right regionalist group calling itself the “Black Wolves” (*Schwarze Wölfe*), of concrete monument erected in Thann during the tercentenary celebrations of 1948. A note sent by this group to the regional press directly challenged the typical French patriotic narratives: ‘1681-1981: 300 years of French colonialism in Alsace are 300 too many! The conquest of Alsace-Lorraine at that time was not a LIBERATION but a ROBBERY [*Raub*] in violation of international law”.<sup>xix</sup> A more moderate, recent challenge to the French narrative of “300 years of liberation” came during the commemoration of the centenary of the First World War, when a regionalist party called “Our Land” (*Unser Land*) engaged in various symbolic protests including the unveiling of a red and white regionalist flag from the spire of Strasbourg Cathedral on the morning of 11 November 2018, in order to protest against the presentation of November 1918 as a moment of “liberation” for Alsace.<sup>xx</sup> Thus, while the challenge to French patriotic narratives of local history is less vocal and less politically potent than the regionalist and autonomist movements of the interwar years, these narratives have not gone wholly unchallenged since 1945.

The memory of periods of German rule from 1870 to 1918 and from 1940 to 1944 has also been a topic of contestation and controversy since 1945, although the result of such controversy has usually been to reinforce the status of Strasbourg and Alsace as the victims of history: not only the victims of nationalism or of German rule but also, in certain cases, of French distrust and misunderstanding. Such was the case in 1953 during the Bordeaux trial, in which fourteen Alsatian recruits into the Waffen SS (only one of whom had been a volunteer) were put on trial alongside German Waffen SS members for their involvement in the massacre of French civilians at Oradour-sur-Glane. Although the Alsatian conscripts received lighter penalties than the Germans, the guilty verdict was met by wide-spread protest and consternation in Alsace. 6,000 people took to the streets in protest in Strasbourg, and the war memorial on the place de la République was draped in black cloth. Fearing a return of the autonomist crises of the interwar years, the French national assembly hastily drafted a bill of amnesty and the Alsatians were released from prison. According to a report by the French *préfet* in Strasbourg, the whole episode had been extremely regrettable because the experience of Nazi rule and wartime conscription had in fact made the local population feel more French than ever before: “the Alsatians never felt so French as when they remembered being the victims of Germany”.<sup>xxi</sup>

After 1953, many Alsatians thus felt a double sense of victimization, first as victims of German tyranny and subsequently as victims of French distrust and suspicion. Such a discourse of victimization has not only shaped the memory of 1940-1944 but has also been projected back onto the period 1870-1918: the construction of the Mémorial de l'Alsace-Moselle in 2005 at Schirmeck, near the site of the National Socialist re-education camp of Schirmeck-Vorbruck, has reinforced this narrative of Alsace as a victim of German rule during both historical periods, and of French misunderstanding ever since. While some recent events, such as the exhibition "Strasbourg 1940-1944" held at the municipal archives from May 2021 to January 2022 have been able to look at this period in a more nuanced, objective way, the period 1940-1944 is still a highly sensitive subject in Alsace, particularly when compared to the rest of France, where the history and memory of the Occupation and the Vichy regime have been the subject of greater critical scholarly attention<sup>xxii</sup>

### **The Europeanization of Strasbourg's architectural and cultural heritage**

In such a context, the Europeanization of Strasbourg's past since 1945 has facilitated the process of reconciliation, making it possible for elements of local history that fit uneasily into French national narratives to be celebrated as evidence of the city's European heritage or "destiny" without undermining the city's French nationality in the present. The founding of the Council of Europe in the city in 1949, and later the choice of Strasbourg as the site for the first directly elected European Parliament in 1979 have reinforced this narrative of a European "destiny", an idea that was also particularly prominent during the celebration of the city's "2000<sup>th</sup> anniversary" in 1988. In the same year, Strasbourg's historic centre was added to the UNESCO World Heritage list, and this protected area was expanded in 2017 to include the *Neustadt* constructed under German rule after 1871. Both the 1988 and 2017 UNESCO decisions underlined Strasbourg's unique *dual* heritage as a product of two cultures.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The selective Europeanization of the local past was a recognizable feature of the opening session of the Council of Europe, held at Strasbourg University on 10 August 1949, when the council's acting president – Édouard Herriot, whose centralizing government had aggravated Alsatian regionalist tensions in the 1920s – spoke of two great moments in Strasbourg's glorious past: the writing of the Marseillaise in the city in 1792 and the experiences of Strasbourg university's most famous student, Goethe, in the 1770s. The former, Herriot implied, was a symbol of the universal claims of the French Revolution but he also insisted that it was proof of the undying loyalty of Strasbourg to France: "this dear city with a faithful heart whose body has been so often martyred but which has never let its soul be violated".<sup>xxiv</sup> While the Marseillaise was thus only partly Europeanized, the figure of Goethe was entirely denationalized in Herriot's speech as "the example of an intellect that transcends and overcomes national boundaries".<sup>xxv</sup> This statement stands in stark contrast to previous German nationalist claims regarding Goethe's experience in the city. In the same hall just six years previously, Goethe's experience in the borderland had been proclaimed as an almost

religious conversion to German national consciousness.<sup>xxvi</sup> By denationalizing Goethe in this way Strasbourg's role as a European cultural crossroads was emphasized and, simultaneously, the German cultural claims to Goethe, and to Alsace as a German cultural heartland, were undermined.

In the decades which followed the foundation of the Council of Europe, the historical experience of Strasbourg would frequently be presented as that of a European "crossroads", which made it possible for events that had previously been portrayed in terms of French-German cultural conflicts on the Rhine to be re-invented as evidence of fruitful cultural cross-fertilization and exchange. In a report on Strasbourg's municipal museums in 1950, the long-serving director of museums Hans Haug noted that, after the foundation of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg appeared "destined for a new role in history" which the municipal museum's collections could support by providing evidence of the city's "essentially European civilization".<sup>xxvii</sup> The representation of local heritage as European heritage would characterise a number of commemorations and exhibitions during this period, including the 1959 exhibition entitled "Strasbourg et l'Europe à travers l'histoire" and the exhibition "Strasbourg et l'Europe" organized to mark the opening of the session of the newly elected European parliament in 1979.<sup>xxviii</sup> In the catalogue for the latter exhibition, the city's mayor Pierre Pflimlin, a key figure in the city's reinvention as a European "capital", made reference to the conflicts of the past, but only in order to underline Alsace's commitment to the task of constructing a united Europe. Alsace he claimed, was "faithful to its European mission, to which the inhabitants of all Alsace attach great importance because our region, more than any other, has been the victim of the fratricidal struggles that have torn our continent apart".<sup>xxix</sup> The idea of Strasbourg as a cultural crossroads was thus frequently combined with an image of the borderland as the suffering and innocent victim of modern conflicts.

The 'dual' cultural heritage of borderland, in the decades after 1949, has been transformed into a symbol of peaceful European co-existence, rather than conflict. Cultural developments which had previously been presented, particularly in National Socialist historical propaganda, as evidence of cultural conflict and national struggle could appear as peaceful and fruitful moments of cultural exchange when presented in a European context. Strasbourg's role as a centre of the Reformation was reinvented along these lines. In 1991, the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the Protestant reformer Martin Bucer, founder of the city's Protestant 'Gymnasium' with Johannes (Jean) Sturm, which would become the university, was celebrated with a European outlook in an exhibition entitled "Martin Bucer, Strasbourg et l'Europe"<sup>xxx</sup> The figure of Bucer, who had been presented during the 1942 'year of historical education' as proto-nationalist fighting for German cultural unity, was transformed into a figure of peaceful intellectual exchange rather than one of cultural struggle. The 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the "Gymnasium", portrayed under National Socialist rule as a bastion of German Protestantism and national struggle, was commemorated with an exhibition which made no reference to national implications, and barely even to Protestant-Catholic conflict, but which instead placed Strasbourg and the surrounding region at the cultural and intellectual heart of Europe.<sup>xxxi</sup> Similarly, the cultural



life of medieval Strasbourg, which had previously been used to assert German nationalist claims, has been celebrated in recent years as a further example of the city's "European" heritage.<sup>xxxii</sup>

In the period since the Second World War the commemoration of Strasbourg's "European" past has therefore predominantly involved the denationalization of those periods, figures and events in local history – such as medieval architecture, the Reformation, or Goethe – that had previously been central to German nationalist claims. Historical events tying the city to France – such as its annexation in 1681, its contributions to the history of the French Revolution and Empire, or its two twentieth-century "liberations" – have tended to be remembered within a more narrowly national framework that (at its least subtle) identifies France as the bringer of both liberty and liberation to the Rhine borderlands, a discourse that has not always been well received by Alsatian regionalists. Nevertheless, the position of Strasbourg at the heart of the European project and as the symbolic site of post-war French-German reconciliation has made it possible, in contrast to the periods of national conflict from 1870 to 1945, to present a more nuanced, complex and objective vision of local history to the public. Even if the promotion of Strasbourg's role as a seat of European institutions has given an obvious political incentive for emphasizing Strasbourg's history as a cultural crossroads and as a victim of modern national conflicts, it goes without saying that the process of French-German reconciliation (and simply the passage of time since the Second World War) has created the conditions for a much more open and critical discussion of the local past than would have been possible during the successive German and French nation-building campaigns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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<sup>xxvii</sup> Haug, Hans. 1950. *Les musées de Strasbourg 1900-50*. Strasbourg: Édition de "Saisons d'Alsace": 37.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Haug, Hans and François Himly (eds). 1959. *Strasbourg et l'Europe à travers l'histoire: exposition organisée par les Archives Départementales du Bas-Rhin, 23 septembre - 3 octobre 1959*, Strasbourg: Archives Départementales du Bas-Rhin, p. i.

<sup>xxix</sup> Ville de Strasbourg. 1979. *Exposition Strasbourg et l'Europe à l'Hôtel de Ville*. Strasbourg Imprimerie des dernières nouvelles de Strasbourg: 5.

<sup>xxx</sup> Krieger, Christian et al. (eds). 1991. *Martin Bucer, Strasbourg et l'Europe: Exposition à l'occasion du 500e anniversaire du réformateur strasbourgeois Martin Bucer 1491-1991, 13 juillet – 19 octobre 1991*. Strasbourg, Église Saint Thomas. For the portrayal of Martin Bucer in 1942, see 'Ein Elsässer als Vorkämpfer deutscher Geistesinheit: Martin Bucer – der bedeutendste Mitarbeiter Jakob Sturms', *Strassburger neueste Nachrichten*, August 6, 1942.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire de Strasbourg. 1988. *Université de Strasbourg XIIIe – XXe siècles: La Ville – la Région – L'Europe*, Strasbourg: Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire de Strasbourg.

<sup>xxxii</sup> See for example the 2008 exhibition "Strasbourg 1400: Un foyer d'art dans l'Europe gothique", organized by the municipal museums.