

Introduction: The Franco-Prussian War in French and German History

Abstract:

This virtual special issue brings together a selection of articles from *French History* and *German History* to mark the 150th anniversary of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. The articles centre upon some of the key themes that have driven historical research in recent years, including violence, the conduct of war, national and border identities, republicanism, liberalism, and state-building. Moving beyond traditional military studies and the focus on the war itself, the articles reflect a growing scholarly interest in the wider political, social, and cultural repercussions of the Franco-Prussian War.

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 brought widespread political, social and cultural upheaval and contributed significantly towards the international tensions that led to the outbreak of the First World War. As the most significant European conflict between 1815 and 1914, involving around two million soldiers and resulting in over 180,000 dead, the war has long been the focus of debates about whether it was a truly ‘modern’ and ‘total’ war.¹ The deadly capabilities of new, more powerful weaponry such as the Chassepot rifle clashed with changing international laws and attitudes on the conduct of war as well as the treatment of soldiers and civilians. At the same time, experiences of the fighting and both sides’ attempts to rationalize the war as a struggle for the nation brought new thinking about identity and the relationship between the citizen and the nation. The aftermath also saw unprecedented

commemoration of fallen soldiers and the erection of memorials dedicated to the nation in France and Germany.

This virtual special issue brings together a selection of articles from *French History* and *German History* to mark the 150th anniversary of this pivotal conflict. While historians have sought increasingly to frame the Franco-Prussian War in an international and global perspective, the official commemorations sought to package the conflict into an exclusively Franco-German framework.² The neat formula that the Franco-Prussian War began seventy-five years of hostilities between 1870 and 1945, which were followed by seventy-five years of peace, subsumed the conflict into the two world wars and suggested that the First and Second World Wars were primarily Franco-German clashes. In bringing together articles from *French History* and *German History*, our aim is not to suggest that the Franco-Prussian War was merely a ‘duel between two nations’ or that it should be approached through a solely national lens. Rather it is to draw comparisons and to highlight the entangled histories of the two nations and their borderlands.³ The articles therefore centre upon some key themes in recent research, including violence, the conduct of war, national and border identities, republicanism, liberalism and state-building. Moving beyond traditional military studies and the focus on the war itself, the articles reflect a growing scholarly interest in the wider political, social, and cultural repercussions of the Franco-Prussian War.⁴

The Franco-Prussian War was a formative experience in the political evolution of France and Germany alike. While victory meant that unified Germany became a powerful new force at the heart of Europe, the concomitant reduction in French power was magnified by the spectre of civil war following the Paris Commune of 1871. For France, *l'année terrible* exacerbated

the divisions over the nature of the Republic that were to shape French politics for the decades that followed. In his article, 'Republicanism, war and democracy: the *Ligue du Midi* in France's war against Prussia, 1870-1871', Sudhir Hazareesingh focuses on a republican military defence association in Marseille whose visions and actions highlight the shifting ideas about the French Republic and nation. As Hazareesingh demonstrates, the *Ligue's* republican patriotism was universalistic and civic, outward-looking in embracing non-French citizens. However, it also embodied Jacobin divisions over the location of sovereignty within the Republic. These political beliefs shaped the *Ligue's* approach towards the war. It clashed with the more moderate Government of National Defence in eschewing conventional war in favour of an all-out republican war fought not just by armies on the battlefield but by the people. The clash between these approaches was, Hazareesingh argues, one of the defining early phases of the Franco-Prussian War.

The tensions in republican values that served at once to inspire and to hinder the Government of National Defence's conduct of the Franco-Prussian War are explored in Bertrand Taithe's article, 'Slow revolutionary deaths: murder, silence and memory in the early Third Republic'. Taithe examines the killing of republican national guardsman Commandant Arnaud by members of his own community in Lyon in December 1870. The mobilization of the National Guard had been key to Interior Minister Léon Gambetta's vision of a nation in arms after Sedan. However, like in Marseille, Lyon's republicans espoused more radical visions of the Republic and the nation than the Government of National Defence. The city had already been the scene of political turmoil, proclaiming its own commune on 4 September and bursting into revolutionary uprising three weeks later. Above all, however, the fact that Arnaud was killed by a crowd that included ordinary men, women and children created national outrage.

Moderate republicans and conservatives condemned the murder as the outcome of revolutionary excesses in what came to be seen as a foreshadowing of the Paris Commune.

The incidents examined by Hazareesingh and Taithe demonstrate how the Franco-Prussian War exacerbated republican divisions over the nature and legitimacy of armed conflict and violence. More broadly, Taithe suggests that the Arnaud killing may be understood as part of a process in which the dehumanization of social enemies culminated in the violent suppression of the Paris Commune.⁵ In different but not unconnected ways, the violence perpetrated by both sides during the Franco-Prussian War became central to debates about the conduct of war, with both belligerents being accused of violating the 1864 Geneva Convention. The growth of humanitarian movements, new international laws on war, and improved medical treatment helped transform attitudes towards soldiers' responsibilities and sacrifices. In her article, 'German suffering in the Franco-German war, 1870/71', Christine Krüger therefore shifts the focus towards the experiences of soldiers. The imperatives of German nationalism drove a narrative that downplayed or disregarded suffering to glorify sacrifice for the nation instead. The German press rarely reported the realities faced by soldiers; only when seeking to incite hostility towards the French enemy was their suffering placed in the foreground. German military and political leaders complained that their soldiers were subjected to 'uncivilized' conduct by French colonial forces. Alleging that German soldiers' bodies had been dismembered and that their limbs had been taken as trophies, they sought to contrast the 'brutality' of France's African soldiers with the 'civilized' violence of conventional European forces. In turn, Krüger suggests, the French deployment of irregular combatants was used by German forces to justify their own violations of the Geneva Convention.

While the defeat exacerbated political and social divisions in France, victory provided a rallying-point for those who aspired to create a unified German state. In both cases, the glorification of soldiers' sacrifice became central to nationalist tropes, fuelling a wave of war memorials.⁶ Both countries also erected allegorical statues to encourage their citizens to internalize and engage with new visions of the nation. Patricia Mazón's article, 'Germania triumphant: the Niederwald national monument and the liberal moment in imperial Germany', looks at one such example. Completed in 1883, the Niederwald monument became one of the most significant expressions of imperial Germany. However, as Mazón observes, its liberal vision was complex and contested, seeking to represent at once the universalism of the nation and its particularities. The monument's statue of Germania sought to present a unifying vision that transcended old rivalries between *kleindeutsch* and *grossdeutsch* notions of Germany. It presented a youthful, strong and victorious image, but also one of vigilance. The bas-reliefs on the monument's base portrayed the significance of the Franco-Prussian War in the formation of the German empire. In depicting the uprising of the German people, the bas-reliefs presented war as a catalyst for German nationhood and military service as the highest duty for the German citizen. Nevertheless, Mazón argues, the monument's problematic juxtaposition of universalist and particularist visions crystallized the tensions in liberal thinking about the nation and highlighted the longer-term problems of creating a unified German state.

Approaching this topic from another angle, in his article, 'Monarchical state-building through state destruction: Hohenzollern self-legitimization at the expense of deposed dynasties in the *Kaiserreich*', Jasper Heinzen suggests that a swift military victory did not resolve the broader

struggles of German unification. Situating the political consequences of Prussian military success in a broader chronological framework, Heinzen focuses on the ‘German civil war’ of 1866, arguing that it was the turning-point in establishing Prussian domination of Germany.⁷ The Hohenzollern monarchy’s decision to prioritize *raison d’état* in 1866 caused tensions with other European dynasties and undermined support for a unified Germany centred upon the monarchy. In the years that followed unification, the Hohenzollern monarchy therefore engaged in concerted efforts at reconciliation with the deposed dynasties of the other German states. Where other historians have looked at the creation and use of national symbols and rituals, especially those associated with victory in the Franco-Prussian War, Heinzen explores the Hohenzollerns’ use of soft power to win the people over to the new German empire.

As scholars have expanded their approaches beyond the national lens to embrace global, international, transnational and comparative histories, the border region of Alsace has become a particularly fertile area of research.⁸ The 1871 German annexation ignited debates about identity not just in Alsace itself but in France and Germany as well. In his article, ‘The virgin with the sword: Marian apparitions, religion and national identity in Alsace in the 1870s’, Detmar Klein analyses the intertwining of religion and national identity in the contested border region during the 1870s. The Franco-Prussian War and the subsequent annexation of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany gave rise to a proliferation of Marian apparitions. Klein focuses on the example of Krüth, where in 1872 a young girl claimed to have had a vision of the Virgin Mary confronting a group of Prussian soldiers. In the months that followed, the village attracted thousands of pilgrims who believed that the apparition signalled Mary’s protection of France and her refusal to permit the permanent separation of Alsace-Lorraine from the motherland. The incident came at a particularly fraught time for Alsatians torn between regional, national, and religious affinities. With the deadline for

Alsations to opt for French nationality fast approaching, Klein suggests that many felt a greater cultural affiliation with France than with a German empire that had sprung from France's military defeat. At the same time, with Bismarck waging *Kulturkampf* to limit the power of the Catholic Church, the links between religion, class and anti-German sentiment became reinforced in the development of Alsatian identities.

The collection of articles in this virtual special issue presents a snapshot of the scholarship by historians of France and Germany, highlighting some of the developments in the research on the impact of the Franco-Prussian War in the past two decades. In a relatively small selection of articles, there are, of course, gaps in coverage which reflect some of the areas that remain under-researched. As historians turn increasingly to explore the international repercussions of the Franco-Prussian War, studying its resonances beyond France and Germany will help point the way towards new understandings not just of the conflict itself, but of the broader spectrum of nineteenth-century European and global history.

¹ S. Förster and J. Nagler (eds.), *On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861-1871* (Cambridge, 1997). For re-examinations of the international and diplomatic repercussions of the Franco-Prussian War, see W. Mulligan, 'Britain, the "German revolution", and the fall of France, 1870/1', *Historical Research*, 84 (2011), 310-27; D. Wetzel, *A duel of nations: Germany, France, and the diplomacy of the war of 1870-1871* (Madison, 2012).

² N. Bourguinat, G. Vogt, *La guerre franco-allemande de 1870. Une histoire globale* (Paris, 2020). The global impact of the war is also addressed in Q. Deluermoz, *Commune(s), 1870-1871. Une traversée des mondes au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 2020).

³ For a Franco-German perspective, see M. König and E. Julien, *Histoire franco-allemande, vol. 7: Rivalités et interdépendances, 1870–1918* (Villeneuve d’Ascq, 2018) also published in German, *Deutsch-Französische Geschichte, vol. 7: Verfeindung und Verflechtung. Deutschland und Frankreich 1870-1918* (Darmstadt, 2019).

⁴ See, for example, T. Arand, *1870/71: Die Geschichte des Deutsch-Französischen Krieges erzählt in Einzelschicksalen* (Hamburg, 2018); R. Chrastil, *Organizing for War: France, 1870-1914* (Baton Rouge, 2010); B. M. Scianna, ‘A predisposition to brutality? German practices against civilians and *francs-tireurs* during the Franco-Prussian war 1870–1871 and their relevance for the German ‘military *Sonderweg*’ debate’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 30 (2019), 968-93.

⁵ This is explored in greater depth in B. Taithe, *Citizenship and wars: France in turmoil 1870-1871* (London, 2001).

⁶ See K. Varley, *Under the shadow of defeat: the war of 1870-71 in French memory* (Basingstoke, 2008); S. Tison, *Comment sortir de la guerre? Deuil, mémoire et traumatisme (1870-1940)* (Rennes, 2011).

⁷ For a fuller analysis, see J. Heinzen, *Making Prussians, raising Germans: a cultural history of Prussian state-building after civil war, 1866-1935* (Cambridge, 2017).

⁸ A. Carrol, *The return of Alsace to France, 1918-1939* (Oxford, 2018).