

Nationalizing Catholicism, 1870-71: “Letter” from a Catholic Soldier from Bavaria (1870)

Abstract

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 attracted intense media attention. Sources from popular culture reinforced the narrative that Germans’ shared struggle for the new nation was contributing to overcoming regional and confessional differences. The following letter, whether fictional or not, invoked the nationalization of Catholicism: A Bavarian Catholic soldier praises the fighting spirit, Christian mindset, and music of Prussian soldiers, and in the process distances himself from Catholic France.

Source

Poetry from the Battlefield

We share with our readers the following lovely poem, which an officer of the 93rd (Anhalt) infantry regiment sent to his sister on the 17th of August, together with a rose that he had picked on the 16th, the day before the taking of Toul, outside of its ramparts.

To the thunder of artillery,
And the bursting of grenades,
While the chassepot rifles sang,
And the submachine guns played,
There at Toul on that bloody day,
I plucked myself a rose.

There were no laurels to be won,
For our troops, no possibility,
Without breaching wall or bastion
to plant the flag of victory.
Thus at Toul on that bloody day
A single rose I plucked.

For the honor and glory of Germany,
I will fight at any hour,
Fearing no mortal injury!
As a sign thereof take this flower.
Where’er it be on that bloody day,
Come what come may.

From a letter penned by a Bavarian soldier (Landsberg Light Infantry Battalion) to his parents in Munich, we have selected the following characteristic excerpt: “The war has not turned us into Lutherans, but rather Prussians. You can tell that to the Reverend Father, because as we were marching off, he was so fearful for our souls. The Prussians are truly steadfast comrades and fight side by side with us when we go after the French. The latter are a devious folk, even if they, like the Bavarians, call themselves Catholic. The Prussians don’t cross themselves, but

they are still Christian. If only the Reverend Father could have seen, there at Sedan, how after the battle, the Prussian riflemen who had fought alongside us sang a hymn and played the music to it. We all shouted with joy but stopped right away as the Prussians started to sing. We felt a bit ashamed, as we couldn't remember any song that was as stirring as that of the Prussians!"

Source: *Humor im Felde. Heiteres aus dem Deutsch-Französischen Kriege von 1870*. Zweites Heft. Leipzig: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1870, p. 54. Available online at:
<http://opacplus.bsb-muenchen.de/title/BV020728962/ft/bsb10618420?page=3>

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