"Alsace-Lorraine," *Meyer's Conversation Lexicon*, 6th Edition, Volume 5 (1908)

Abstract

This excerpt demonstrates how knowledge could be manipulated to satisfy the interests of state and nation, a common endeavor in modern Germany and elsewhere. At the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), the new German Empire annexed Alsace, the long-contested border territory with France. In justifying the annexation, this excerpt draws on historical facts to portray residents of the province as core constituents of the German nation and as glorious intellectual and spiritual contributors to it. The constituents' sense of belonging, so the excerpt argues, was simply corrupted by the past betrayals and contaminations of the intruding powers. Therefore, in rejoining the German community, residents of Alsace were finally coming home. Weapons had won Alsace for the new state; here, knowledge is "weaponized" to justify their use.

Source

The History of Alsace

[...]

The Alsace played an outstanding role in Germany's intellectual life in the Middle Ages. The monk Otfried von Weißenburg translated the Gospels into the Rhenish-Franconian dialect, rendering them in rhyming German verse for the first time. The Minne singers [*Minnesänger*, i.e. singers of love songs] Reinmar von Hagenau and Gottfried von Strasbourg were natives of Alsace. The Dominicans in Colmar, [Fritsche] Klosener and Jakob von Königshofen in Strasbourg cultivated the writing of history. The deepening of the religious spirit toward the end of the Middle Ages found its most outstanding representatives in the Alsace in Eckard and Johann Tauler. While Gutenberg set up the first printing press in Strasbourg, Geiler von Kaisersberg, Wimpheling, Sebastian Brant, and Thomas Murner spread German civic humanism in their speeches and writings; insofar as this humanism helped undermine the authority of the Church, it laid the groundwork for the reception of Luther's Reformation (it does not follow, however, that the individual humanists can be considered as forerunners of the reformer). That is why the Reformation took hold in the Alsatian cities, especially Strasbourg, immediately upon introduction. The first to emerge was Matthias Zell from Kaysersberg, though he soon found helpers in Capito from Hagenau, Caspar Hedio, and Martin Bucer, who achieved importance far beyond Alsace through his mediating role among the reformers. The Council and the Assembly of Aldermen in Strasbourg abolished the Mass on February 20, 1529. The Peasants' War, which also raged in Alsace, but was quickly suppressed by Duke Anton of Lorraine, prompted a reaction: the Austrian rulers, especially, eradicated Lutheran teachings in the Sundgau, and other Imperial estates followed suit. But the cities, chief among them Strasbourg under the leadership of the astute and moderate mayor Sturm von Sturmeck, remained loyal to the Reformation. Even though Strasbourg embraced the Reformed teachings of the Swiss at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, it maintained a close affiliation with the Lutheran estates, joined the Schmalkaldic League in 1531, and had its troops join the federal army under Schärtlin's command in 1546. When the League was defeated, the Council had to content itself with the Augsburg Interim, until the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 granted the Alsatian Imperial estates religious freedom and equality. Intellectual life in Strasbourg no longer hovered at the lofty heights of years past, but the establishment of an academy by Emperor Max II and the school reforms of Johannes Sturm still counted as notable achievements.

The first serious attempt to extend the French realm all the way to the Rhine was made by King Henry II of France, when he wrested Metz, Toul, and Verdun from the German Empire in 1552; but he did not win Strasbourg. But just how little will the Habsburg Imperial house had to preserve the borderland for Germany was shown by the treaty of March 20, 1617, in which it ceded its rights in Alsace to Spain. During the Thirty Years War, Duke Bernhard von Weimar tried to create a principality in Alsace, albeit with French money and French support; when he died prematurely in 1639, Alsace fell under the control of the French, and in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the emperor relinquished all his rights to France, which thereby took the place of Spain. However, the rights of the Imperial estates were specifically recognized in this matter, as the emperor had renounced his rights only as territorial ruler, not on behalf of the Empire. But the impotence of the Empire allowed France to gradually expand its power. Many Alsatians saw French rule as unavoidable, and the subordination of the various small lordships under a monarchical order seemed like progress to many. When the allies threatened to invade Alsace in 1674, Louis XIV occupied the ten Imperial cities and stripped them of their rights as Imperial cities. Strasbourg suffered the same fate in 1681, and the Empire was unable to prevent it; the activity of the Chambers of Reunion (for this cause) increasingly strengthened France's position. Widespread bitterness about this violation was further heightened by the favor shown to the Roman Catholic church at the expense of Protestantism; on the other hand, France allowed the German entity in Alsace to continue undisturbed and thus contributed much to the greater spiritual reconciliation. In some way, the German character of the population asserted itself more forcefully than ever before in literature and science, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and up until the French Revolution, the closest of ties existed between Germany and the borderland that had been wrested from it. The University of Strasbourg flourished and was visited by numerous Germans (Herder and Goethe, 1770–71); exceedingly famous jurists, historians, and philologists taught there, including the likes of Johannes Schilter, Jeremias Oberlin, Johann Scherz, J. D. Schöpflin, and Schweighäuser. Economically speaking, the affiliation with France was advantageous. Industry and trade increased; tobacco-growing and wine production experienced a major surge. The population was at ease with the existing conditions and was of a conservative and particularistic inclination.

The French Revolution then brought about a significant change in this respect. Following the decrees of the French National Assembly of August 4, 1789, which abolished all special medieval rights, the French sympathizers assumed power in Alsace, and the remaining Imperial estates were eliminated without any consideration for the rights of the German Empire. When peace and order returned after the fall of Robespierre, Alsace – which had been divided into two *departements*, Upper Rhine (Sundgau) and Lower Rhine (Nordgau) – was merged with France extraordinarily quickly. It was partly the accomplishments of the Revolution, and party the military school under Napoleon I that prompted Alsace to make a complete break with its German past. Many Alsatians, men like Kleber, Rapp, and others, played a major role in the French army. The equality of all citizens before the law and the introduction of freedom of movement won the population over to the new conditions, and when the allied troops invaded Alsace at the end of 1813, the population responded with a mixture of indifference and hostility. Still, allegiance to France was not yet so deeply rooted that it could not have been eliminated through the timely reunification of Alsace with Germany. But the opposition of the foreign powers and the half-heartedness of Austria prevented the cession of Alsace, which German patriots demanded in 1815; only Landau was ceded to Bavaria. Since then, all French governments have worked hard to merge Alsace completely with France, to stamp out the German language, and to grant exclusive predominance to the French language and customs. To be sure, the Alsatians clung tenaciously to the German language in scholarship and literature, and the Protestant clergy cultivated German among the common people to make it more difficult for radical elements from beyond the Vosges Mountains to make inroads. But the many Alsatians who found employment in the army and the administration became just as many representatives of the French view; political fates and commercial ties bound

the educated classes ever more closely to France, and the common people, too, were drawn over to its side by the Catholic clergy. Even if Alsatians flattered themselves by believing that they played a mediating role between Germany and France in matters intellectual and spiritual, by the time war broke out in 1870, they had completely merged, both politically and materially, with the wealthy and mighty French state.

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Source: "Elsaß-Lothringen," *Meyers großes Konversations-Lexikon. Ein Nachschlagewerk des allgemeinen Wissens*. Sixth completely revised and expanded edition. Volume 5. Leipzig and Vienna: Bibliographisches Institut, 1908, pp. 733–35. Available online at: https://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101064063108

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