

The Unwilling Insider's Encounter with Nazism: Alsatian *incorporés de force* in World War II

World War II is most often discussed today in terms of its global implications: as a conflict waged across continents by soldiers from around the world, it marked the twentieth century and gave rise to a new world order consisting of international blocks of economic interests dominated by hegemonic superpowers. The appeal examining the universal impact of such an affair is clear, and yet it runs the risk of glossing over the incredible drama experienced in individual localities subject to the ravages of war. In France, ignominious defeat in the summer of 1940 precipitated a national crisis, perhaps experienced most profoundly in the regions of Alsace-Lorraine.¹ The German *de facto* annexation of these two regions, based on claims of a shared ethnic, linguistic, and political history, led to the special incorporation of nearly 130,000 of their soldiers between 1942 and the Allied liberation in the summer of 1944. For those who lived through this German conscription, intense questions of nationhood added to the grueling demands of livelihood within the military, made all the worse by the outcome of the war and the stain of having fought for the wrong side. Yet the process of coming to terms with forced service sheds light on the nature of the war, and has only become a field truly open to study by historians within the last two decades, as survivors and their descendants have brought their writings forward into the public sphere.² The largest quantity of these writings consist of letters exchanged between soldiers and their friends in family—for the most part resident in Alsace, but

increasingly spread across the continent as the war continued to displace fighters and civilians alike. In studying these documents, we encounter a unique record of the war, describing people, places, and events from the perspective of reluctant members of the German military. Given their physical proximity to the intensely Nazified soldiers of the *Werhmacht*, and the ideological war being waged within them, these are voices that merit serious consideration, and whose insights into what it means to be loyal and patriotic have lasting significance.

The question of Alsatian nationality stretches back over more than a millennium, far outdating the existence of the modern states of France and Germany. Sharing ethnic ties with the early Germanic Alemanni people, the development of Alsace's dual identity began with its incorporation into the Frankish kingdom under the Merovingian dynasty around the year 500 C.E.³ Despite the clearly visible influence of Germanic culture on the region, by the mid-nineteenth century Alsace, though divided into two departments, had become definitively French, thanks to the Revolution of 1789's powerful redefining influence on what constituted the boundaries of the French nation and what created French identity. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870 severed this national unity in the act of binding the Germanic states, thus lifting the Alsace-Moselle territory from the defeated French nation on the basis of their cultural-linguistic connection to Germany. The internalization of this "black stain"—that is the affront of the forgotten provinces—has been extensively studied by scholars of the Third Republic whose work points to the profound importance of these seized French territories in the rise of Franco-German revanchism.⁴ The First World War ultimately reversed this annexation, restoring the territorial boundaries that stood before 1871 and securing French nationality for Alsace-Lorrainers in Section V of the Treaty of Versailles. Yet the effects of such a muddled history were not easily ignored, and at the outbreak of the Second World War, they came to bear as Germany and

France clashed once more in a contest of arms that swept across the Rhine and into the homes of Alsace.

Beginning in August of 1942, under the leadership of Gauleiter Robert Wagner, Alsatians were conscripted into the German armed forces.⁵ Among those forcefully recruited, resistance to German military aims and Nazi propaganda took many forms, some more active than others. Among the subtlest and yet most flagrant opportunities for disobedience available to the *incorporés* lay in the use of the French language. Though many Alsatians were conversant in German or its closely related Alsatian dialect, in addition to French, soldiers like Frédéric Hunzinger made the deliberate choice to revert to their natal tongue in direct opposition to German mandate. Moreover, Hunzinger channeled in his letters a frank, irreverent discourse, always toeing the line of blatant dissention. “The sergeants treat us less like men and more like savage beasts. Altogether there are 600 of us Alsatians that they have captured here. All of them are like me, recognizing their old motherland.”⁶ Though some leniency can be imagined due to the ambiguous concept of a *motherland* for Alsace, Hunzinger’s tone and other correspondences leave little doubt as to his true meaning. In another letter, after explaining the lengths he has gone in order to hospitalize himself, he writes to say that the “other 17 soldiers who are in the same room don’t share the same opinion with *l’homme à la moustache*... At any rate,” he continues after this dangerous aside, “I have already won the sympathy of all the staff: sister, adjutant, etc. and even the doctor.”⁷ Other *incorporés* took the risk of speaking and singing in French as they deployed towards the Eastern front, enjoying the feelings of unity this promoted among the Alsatians.⁸ In addition to these shows of deliberate noncompliance with instructions that all activity of army personnel be conducted in German, Alsatians resorted to French for more dangerous forms of subversion as well. Eugène Philipps notes in his memoirs that his

letters, composed in German, frequently contained hidden messages signaled in French, meant to convey important information to his wife including his whereabouts and future destinations.⁹ Such immediate, disobedient responses to the imposition of German authority point to the Alsatian reaction against what was perceived as a foreign, authoritarian power.

While German censorship seems to have failed to discourage all of these attempts at illicit communication, its effects can still be seen in the letters of the *incorporés*. Writing from “onboard,” one soldier, hoping to be granted an extended leave in time to return to his home in Duttlenheim and join his family in the summer cultivation of the fields, mentioned the orders forbidding candid correspondence, “And today, they told us again not to write the truth. What should I write then? That all goes well? It’s all that we have to write.”¹⁰ Those who had yet to make it to the front were evidently less concerned about violating such directives. A friend of Frédéric Hunzinger, Paul Finance also spent an extended stay in the hospital during his time in the *Reichsarbeitsdienst*, though his diagnosis of diphtheria seems to have been genuine. Writing to another friend, he expressed in rather excitable terms the ease with which the Germans could be deceived and the army situation plied for its benefits:

So can you see it for yourself!?? Give yourself a foretaste, but with pleasure... at the beginning, show yourself to be obedient! Write a good resume, if you understand (*Rescue!*— liberation of 1940!)? You have plenty of opportunity, in the company office, where you don’t serve at all, but instead [live] the real bureaucratic life! Once they’ve seen that you’re obedient (because they place great importance on obedience), you’ve won!¹¹

Another *incorporé*, stationed on the Western front, recounted the events of July 20, 1943 from his unit’s perspective. “We were on alert, ready to leave. At midnight, we listened to the Fuhrer’s speech. My sergeant, a NCO, said to me: ‘Well then Bordmann, once we’re on the front, will you open fire on me?’ Everywhere we go in the four corners, they know the opinion of the Alsatians,

that's the crux."¹² As Bordmann seems to suggest, a state of mutual suspicion and distrust seems to have permeated relations between German military officials and their Alsatian recruits.

Beyond the immediate disruption to the routine of their daily lives, Alsations under the rule of Nazi Germany were further forced to witness as the familiar comforts of their pre-war existence disintegrated in the chaos and violence of war. Writing just after the Robert Wagner's decision to mobilize Alsatian draft classes of 1914-1919 for the Germany forces, Eugène Philipps, a member of the 1918 class, wondered about the chilling implications of such a policy:

Whether that will be enough to save Germany, I don't know. Regardless, in my heart of hearts, I will remain what I have always been, and the German uniform will not change that... If I should not return or if some other mishap should befall me, I would not have voluntarily made the sacrifice, and *I refuse the title "hero's death," because if it isn't voluntary, one cannot be a hero, and I don't want to be a German hero, no, a thousand times no.* I am and will remain what I am and have always been!!! My heart is not German, nor can I be. *Against my will, I will go!* But we are not yet to that point.¹³

For Philipps, this point would arrive soon, unfortunately. When it did, his adamant protestations of French national sentiment, admirable though they may have been, served to intensify the nature of the internal conflict he and other *incorporés* faced, when in the field of battle, there would be little room for any form of hesitation. By dint of their tenure in the *Wehrmacht*, the Alsatian *incorporés* were of course necessarily the enemies of the Allied forces. Yet coming to terms with the practical consequences of changing regimes was hardly as simple as acknowledging the reversal of their fortunes. Another *incorporé* worked with the forces of the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* clearing the debris from an Allied bombing of Strasbourg in the fall of 1943. In describing the "atrocious work" of assisting in the devastated neighborhood, he remarked that although the strategically important rail line connecting the city to Germany had been disturbed by the strike, "proportionally the misery of the civilians [was] much greater."¹⁴ Confronted with nearly two hundred dead bodies predominantly made up of women and children, his assessment

continued in grim terms, brightening only when describing the interactions with his fellow Alsatians: “Only the civilian population was touched. For the rest of my life, I couldn’t forget what I saw here... The people behaved marvelously and weren’t taken by panic.”

The letters written by the Alsatian *incorporés de force* reveal a conflict between the soldiers’ internal sense of identity and the external elements of the Nazi regime they encountered within the army. While their correspondences did at times show a remarkable neglect for the prescripts of the censors, they still engaged the ideological challenges posed by participation in the German army only peripherally. Instead, their writing focused on the mundane: agriculturalists worried over their crops, men over their wives, boys over their friends, while all wondered about the fate of the world they had known.¹⁵ In seeking to share what they could of their new lives with distant loved ones, the *incorporés* chose to describe not the tenets of Nazi teachings but rather the realities of conscripted life. Criticism regarding the quality of food appears throughout many letters, while a preoccupation with the efficiency of the *Feldpost* (the German military postal service) was of the utmost importance to all the men who relied on its services for news and packages from home.¹⁶ Significantly, many of the Alsatian *incorporés* maintained an active, engaged communication among their own peer group. Even as the movement of *Wehrmacht* divisions separated *incorporés*, they went to lengths to keep up with their compatriots, helping to make connections among other *incorporés* brought together and passing along news to the families of friends in service.¹⁷ Understandably, men clung to their ties in Alsace, and to France itself. Yet from the moment of Germany’s invasion of France, the importance of regional identity surmounted that of national citizenship. Eugène Philipps expressed his thoughts on the matter in March 1943: “These events are very unfortunate for our little motherland. Alsace is alone. She must fold. She is obliged to drink this chalice to the thick.

What does she have in her tragic destiny? Who will understand it? No one.”¹⁸ Alsace’s particular history with Germany certainly played into this; a typical French-identifying *incorporé* whose family had been resident in Alsace for at least three generations might have parents born under the German Empire and grand-parents who remembered belonging to France during the emperorship of Napoleon III. What remains to a man of such confused nationality are the tangible elements of belonging. In a mournful poem entitled “*Mes montagnes*,” André Vogel expresses the longing he felt for home:

Regards, my charming mountains,
Encircling the beautiful Alsace
Regards from this far away land
Where I’ve found nothing of your kind
Towards you goes the melancholy of my heart
When alone I recall
You and all that you contain
My little treasure, all my happiness¹⁹

Beyond all the terror soldiers beheld on the fronts of World War II, the Alsatians swallowed a truly bitter pill, forced to accept the reimposition of foreign dominion along with the loss of their nationhood. Though soldiers’ letters home contained relatively few mentions of their opinions on the ideological chasm separating them from their Nazi “allies,” they did in fact contain a wealth of information on how Alsatians were able to direct their energies throughout the war, focusing on the small acts of defiance that could serve to subvert their duties to the German military. Perhaps the most compelling commonality that emerges from the study of the *incorporés de force* is their dedication to *la vraie patrie*, the true Alsatian motherland. In reconciling themselves to the defeat and loss of the France they had known, many Alsatians instead capitalized on their shared history as a people beaten but never defeated.

¹ The political region so hotly contested by both Germany and France has been called many names, each meant to signify slightly variant political and geographical areas. Historians typically prefer to speak of “Alsace and Lorraine,” which corresponds nicely to the modern regions’ names. The specific part of Lorraine that fell under German domain between the Franco-Prussian War and World War I has frequently been referred to as Moselle, the original department name derived from the Moselle River. For simplicity’s sake, this study is restricted to the experience of soldiers hailing from Alsace, though there were few practical differences in the administration of the *Elsaß-Lothringen* territory under the Third Reich. As such, it will make frequent reference to the “Alsatians,” recognizing that contemporary authors often conflated the experiences of *incorporés* from both regions.

² In the preface to the 1993 published collection of his letters and journals from the war, Eugène Philipps writes that “despite the incontestable efforts made by historians, the media and the press in Alsace, this troublesome moment in the history of Alsace, and, in particular, the problems tied to the incorporation by force into the Wehrmacht of the Alsatians of my generation, still remains little known and above all little appreciated beyond the Vosges” (p. 11). This assessment largely bore out in my own research. Apart from a popular, sensationalized autobiographical account of questionable validity (*Le Soldat oublié* [Paris: R. Laffront, 1967]), the vast majority of publications offering first-hand accounts of the incorporation have been published in the last fifteen years.

³ Philippe Dollinger, et al. *Histoire de l’Alsace* (Toulouse: Edouard Privat, 1970), 57-70, 86-120.

⁴ For writing on the phenomenon of French-German *revanchisme*, see the writings of Laurence Turetti, *Quand la France pleurait l’Alsace-Lorraine* (Strasbourg: Nuée Bleue, 2008), and Bruno Ferry, *L’art patriotique face à l’annexion* (Strasbourg: Editions du Quotidien, 2014).

⁵ *Europe Since 1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of War and Reconstruction*, ed. John Merriman and Jay Winter, (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2006), s.v. "Alsace-Lorraine." Gale Virtual Reference Library, accessed October 28, 2015

<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3447000033&v=2.1&u=norm94900&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w&asid=ff2cb12e90d03a92fb8bfd9b43ab2839>.

⁶ Frédéric Hunzinger to Aline (Cheftiane) Janès, October 20, 1942, in *Lettres de Malgré-Nous*, 23.

⁷ Frédéric Hunzinger to Robert and Retzel, January 24, 1943, in *Lettres de Malgré-Nous*, 39.

⁸ Maurice Reppel and Norbert Reppel, *Mon père, une famille, la guerre : lettres d'un malgré nous. Destin d'un Alsacien, 1943-1945* (Colmar: Do Bentzinger, 2012), 56.

⁹ Eugène Philipps, journal, January 2, 1943, in *Une tragédie pour l'Alsace*, (Strasbourg: Editions S.A.L.D.E., 1993), 238.

¹⁰ Robert Geistel to his parents, May 18, 1944, in *Lettres de Malgré-Nous*, 150.

¹¹ Paul Finance to Victor Preiss, November 21, 1942, in *Lettres de Malgré-Nous*, 32.

¹² Georges Bordman to friends, July 30, 1944, in *Lettres de Malgré-Nous: Témoignages d'incorporés de force alsaciens* (Strasbourg: Nuée Bleue, 2012), 185.

¹³ Eugène Philipps, journal, January 2, 1943, in *Une tragédie pour l'Alsace*, (Strasbourg: Editions S.A.L.D.E., 1993), 238.

¹⁴ Jean Hugel, September 8, 1943, in *Lettres de Malgré-Nous*, 43.

¹⁵ François Wambst wrote a friend on November 1, 1943: "During the entire day, I was sad and depressed as never before, and I don't know why or how it came to be so. I reflected on my destiny a lot. What is yet in store for me? I don't know." In *Lettres de Malgré-Nous*, 95. For

examples of a husband's worries, Jacques Baltzer's daily letters to his wife in *Lettres de Malgré-Nous*, 59, 68, 71.

¹⁶ In particular, the lengthy and frequent letters of Jean-Pierre Bader to his mother show the extent to which both of these concerns could monopolize an *incorporés'* correspondence. See *Lettres de Malgré-Nous*, 34, 46, 50, 54, 60, 102.

¹⁷ See the letters of: Frédéric Hunzinger to Robert, November 17, 1942, in *Lettres de Malgré-Nous*, 31; Marcel Thomas to the Fuchs family, September 18, 1944, in *Lettres de Malgré-Nous*, 217.

¹⁸ Eugène Philipps, journal, March 16, 1943, *Une tragédie pour l'Alsace*.

¹⁹ André Vogel, June 18, 1943, in *Lettres de Malgré-Nous*, 57. Ironically, while the poem title, meaning "My Mountains" and the text of the letter were both written in French, both letters included in Vogel's letter were composed in German.