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Challenging the German Empire: Strategic nationalism in Alsace-Lorraine in the First World War

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Abstract

This article introduces the concept of 'strategic nationalism' to explain the shift of national allegiance of most Alsatians and Lorrainers from Germany to France during the First World War. Combining the historiographical concept of 'national indifference' with rational-choice theories of nationalism, the article examines why a growing number of local citizens came to defy the authorities' relentless demand of national loyalty. Contrary to previous studies that emphasize the dictatorial character of the regime and the passivity of local citizens, the article argues that national attitudes were shaped by strategic interests and highly responsive to shifts in state policy, regional circumstances and the course of the war. From mid-1918, it was less escalating state repression or dormant Francophile sympathies, but half-hearted liberalization of policy, the authorities' unfaltering insistence on national loyalty and imminent military and economic collapse that prompted people to see France as an attractive alternative to German rule.

KEYWORDS

Alsace-Lorraine, First World War, everyday nationalism, nationalism from below, local nationalism, rational choice, theories of nationalism

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1 | INTRODUCTION

On 7 June 1918, Social Democrat deputy Hermann Wendel gave a long and embittered speech to the German parliament on the subject of Alsace-Lorraine. Had a plebiscite been held in this disputed borderland before the outbreak of the war, Wendel asserted, 80% of the local population would have voted to remain with Germany, if only as a matter of rational choice. After 4 years of war and military rule, however, the vast majority of inhabitants would now opt for France—'not out of love for the tricolour, but solely out of exasperation, anger, and hatred for everything that has been done to the Alsatians and Lorrainers since 31 July 1914'.¹ Since then, historians have painted a more nuanced picture of national attitudes in the region, placing emphasis on religious, regional, class-based and generational differences (notably Wahl & Richez, 1993, and Wahl, 2004). Young working-class Protestants in Lower Alsace, for instance, tended to be more favourable to German rule than middle-class Catholics in Upper Alsace or Lorraine who still remembered the French era before 1870. Large parts of the rural population remained detached from politics and ignored issues of national identity altogether. What is more, these diverse groups experienced the war in different ways. There was therefore no complete turnaround of national affections between August 1914 and November 1918 (Wahl & Richez, 1993, pp.241–57; Wahl, 2004 pp.188, 234–237). Nevertheless, and without losing sight of this multilayered 'spectrum' of collective identities (Carrol, 2018 p.11), scholars generally concur with Hermann Wendel that by the end of the war, the majority of the local population had overtly turned their backs to Germany and, in late November 1918, welcomed the arrival of French troops (Fischer, 2010 pp.121, 128; Grandhomme, 2013; Wahl & Richez, 1993 pp.251–52).

The failure of the German state to bind the Alsatians and Lorrainers closer to the nation during the war is, at least at first glance, surprising. Sociological studies show that external threat and armed conflict normally boost national solidarity (Collins, 2004). It is even more puzzling considering that the overwhelming majority of the local population had come to accept German rule by 1914. Support for the separatist party (*Protestler* [protesters]) had dropped from 32.2% in 1874 and a peak of 59.5% in 1887 to a mere 5.4% in the last national elections before the war in 1912. In the same elections in 1912, German political parties—the Centre Party of Alsace-Lorraine (28.5%), the Social Democrats (31.7%) and the Liberals (19.5%)—had won the vast majority of seats.² Indeed, in the first weeks of the war, diaries of local inhabitants and reports by civilian and military authorities indicate that most of the Alsatians and Lorrainers were, if perhaps not ardently pro-German, at least not opposed to the German war effort. Some, like the school teacher Philippe Husser in Mulhouse in Upper Alsace, initially accepted the narrative that Germany was encircled and needed to defend itself against the Russian attack (Husser, 1989, p.25). In a similar vein, an internal administrative report noted that at the outbreak of war, the majority of the people, while not showing 'wholehearted enthusiasm,' were 'in high spirits, paired with sternness.'³ German military authorities and local newspapers, in turn, were quick to cite the smooth mobilization and instances of prowar demonstrations as evidence of an enthusiastic and overwhelmingly loyal population, sharing in the German *Augusterlebnis* (Spirit of 1914; Evers, 2016, pp.101–106). What, then, accounts for the complete collapse of this pro-German framing of the war 4 years later?

This study argues that the answer to this question lays in recasting our understanding of how nationalism operated in this setting. Bringing together recent historical studies of 'national indifference' and rational-choice theories of nationalism, this article approaches nationalism as a historically variable strategic resource that citizens may use to pursue their individual interests. In this view, the public display of national affinity appears less as a way of expressing deeply felt sentiments but can rather be understood as means to bargain with state authorities and maximize personal benefits. Following Albert Hirschman's (2004 [1970]) classic typology, Alsatians and Lorrainers could use nationalist language and symbols to different ends—to demonstrate their 'loyalty' to Germany and thus improve their standing with the authorities; to 'voice' war-related or other social, political or economic grievances in an effective, provocative manner; or, ultimately, to advocate for their region's 'exit' from the German nation.

Drawing on new archival evidence—notably, the records of the extraordinary military courts—and focussing on the strategic nationalism of the local population, this article argues that the broad disaffection from German rule in

Alsace-Lorraine by the end of the war was caused by military elites' insistence on unconditional national loyalty and a rigid, narrowly conceived definition of German nationalism. Instead of adapting their nationalist doctrine to accommodate the concerns of the local population and ease national tensions, military commanders doubled down. Their generalized national suspicion politicized national indifference,⁴ polarized fluid identities and ultimately pushed a majority of locals towards a rational preference for exit from Germany.

It is true that numerous historical studies have highlighted the volatile nature of national allegiance in Alsace-Lorraine.⁵ Yet, we still lack a theory-driven, microlevel assessment of the dynamics and mechanisms of this prominent historical case, helping us explain how and why exactly the German state failed to generate national solidarity in its western borderland during the First World War (WWI).⁶ Examining and disentangling the multiple layers of nationalist policies and the role of the local population in this historical setting promises to provide both historians and social scientists with new insights into the context-specific dynamics of nationalism in disputed territories and settings of conflict.

The article begins with a brief review of the literature and a more general discussion of strategic nationalism as a new perspective on nationalization processes. It continues by investigating how and why German military authorities transformed the region into a national danger zone seemingly replete with Francophile subversives. The following section argues that by installing extraordinary military courts to suppress alleged anti-German behaviour and 'cleanse' the region of its subversive 'elements,' the military authorities further politicized, polarized and ultimately alienated the local population. The final section demonstrates that it was the moderation and limitation of repressive measures in the last 2 years of the war that allowed mass disaffection to take hold, confirming Tocqueville's (2011 [1856], p.157) insight that 'the most dangerous time for a bad government is usually when it begins to reform.'

2 | ALSACE-LORRAINE AND STRATEGIC NATIONALISM

Most historical accounts of German policies in Alsace-Lorraine during the WWI present the change of national allegiance as the result of overly harsh and arbitrary military rule. In this view, a repressive German regime 'rejuvenated' dormant sympathies for France by suppressing the French language, restricting personal freedoms and making mass arbitrary arrests (Kramer, 2002, p.110). The image of the Alsations and Lorrainers as passive victims of a brutal German military dictatorship—foreshadowing the horrors of the Second World War (WWII)—is particularly prevalent among local historians (Baechler, 1969 pp.65, 437; Meyer, 2008: 353; Rossé et al., 1936 pp.179–84). It is shared to some extent by German historians, whose focus, however, has been less on Alsace-Lorraine but rather on the political and institutional shortcomings of Imperial Germany (Jahr, 1998; Preibusch, 2006; Ritter, 1973, pp.129–44; Wehler, 1970). English language scholarship has placed most emphasis on the heavy-handed approach of the German authorities, although some authors have also highlighted the repressive side of the French wartime occupation of Alsace (Fischer, 2004; Kramer, 2002; Smith, 1993).

Although harsh administrative measures, hardships of war and latent Francophile sentiments were contributing factors, they do not suffice to explain the surge of anti-German feelings in Alsace-Lorraine. As recent studies on the 'home front' have shown, most of the warring states' populations experienced restrictions of personal freedom, economic hardships and nationalist pressures. Imperial Germany was not alone in singling out 'enemy aliens' and suppressing troublesome minorities (Caglioti, 2014; Caglioti, 2017; Manz, Panayi, & Stibbe, 2018; Panayi, 1993; Panayi, 2014; Stibbe, 2008; Überegger, 2018). In Alsace-Lorraine, arrests in the form of *Schutzhaft* (protective custody) and expulsions to the German interior occurred at a comparatively small scale, not exceeding 6,000 persons or approximately 0.3% of the local population (Rossé et al., 1936, p.244).⁷ In fact, from mid-1917, military authorities put limits to their policy of arresting or expelling suspected subversives and released most detainees.⁸ Extraordinary military courts passed severe sentences, to be sure, but they refrained from delivering indiscriminate penalties with no evidence. And although parts of the bourgeoisie were Francophile, the overwhelming majority of Alsations and Lorrainers did not harbour dormant French sentiments. On the eve of the war, most people's collective identities

were 'fluid,' multilayered and in many cases detached from politics (Carrol & Zanoun, 2011, p.466; Thaler, 2001). The strongest domestic political movement in Alsace-Lorraine before the war called for greater regional autonomy within a reformed German state (Fischer, 2010, pp.21, 47).

Rather than revealing dormant national sentiments stirred up by repressive military rule, the case of Alsace-Lorraine underscores the crucial role specific nationalist policies and rational calculation play in national solidarity. As the sections below will demonstrate, there was a strong correlation between varying national attitudes of the population, on the one hand, and changing circumstances and government policy, on the other. Recent social science research into nationalism supports and provides further analytical depth to this finding (Brown, 2000; Hardin, 1995, pp.16, 19; Hechter, 2000; Zha, 2015, pp.3–5).⁹

It is important to note that rational choice and strategic action are understood here not in the orthodox sense of fully autonomous, all-knowing actors who do nothing but maximize utility (Becker, 1990, p.14). Instead, strategic nationalism here means that individuals act rationally—that is, on the basis of cost–benefit calculations—within the confines of *mental frames* that are formed by, among other factors, their personal experiences, class, gender, ideological preferences and their personality and emotional state (Esser & Kroneberg, 2015). Moreover, as is acknowledged by more recent theories of rational choice, individuals normally possess only incomplete knowledge about a given situation and the likely consequences of their actions (Mathis & Steffen, 2015; Opp, 1999). As a final caveat, only a limited number of an individual's actions result from open-ended decision-making. Rather, to economize resources and reduce complexity, individual actors routinely perform many tasks without considering alternatives (Conlisk, 1996, p.685).

With these important qualifications in mind, rational action still goes a long way in helping us explain the successes and failures of state-led nationalizing projects from the perspective of the citizenry. In this way, the approach of strategic nationalism seeks to contribute to recent efforts by historians to scrutinize in greater depth the responses of local populations to elites' efforts of national mobilization. In several important studies, Jeremy King (2002), Peter Thaler (2001), Tara Zahra (2010), Pieter Judson (2006) and others have rightly placed emphasis on 'fluid identities' and the national indifference of a majority of Europeans long into the 20th century (see also Ther, 2013; van Ginderachter & Fox, 2019, pp.2–4). Their studies demonstrate that even 'in the eye of the nationalist storm in Europe between 1880 and 1948,' many common people ignored or resisted nationalist mobilization (Zahra, 2010, p.98).

Yet labels such as national indifference and fluid identities, useful as they are in highlighting the limits of nationalist mobilization efforts, also imply a sense of passivity. They may lead historians to sideline the agency of the people and inadvertently reiterate the narrative of modern European history as a process of top-down nationalization, however incomplete or erratic. Although aware of this tension, in a recent edited volume on national indifference, Jon Fox, Maarten van Ginderachter and James M. Brophy (2019, p.252) nevertheless advocate for a broad definition of the term that would encompass both ignorance of and active opposition to nationalist pressures. However, as Brendan Karch (2019, pp.181–84) compellingly argues in his contribution to the same volume, such a broad notion is hardly useful when seeking to explain the diverse ways in which local people responded to nationalist pressures. In his case, post-WWI Upper Silesia, it has led historians to the odd conclusion that the region was a prime example of national indifference when in fact it was ravaged by mass nationalist and ethnic violence. In a similar vein, Max Bergholz (2013, p.680) has recently noted that national indifference, despite its merits, cannot account for abrupt shifts in national allegiance as happened on several occasions in post-WWII Bosnia–Herzegovina.¹⁰ Arguably, a more stringent way of defining national indifference would be to limit it to the ignorance of nationalist pressures while excluding from the term active engagement with nationalism—ranging from avoiding to challenging, manipulating and embracing national rallying calls.

Social science approaches that highlight the rational or 'situational' character of nationalism, in turn, tend to sideline or entirely ignore the fundamental importance of changing historical settings for the dynamics of nationalism (Brown, 2000, p.13–17; Jenne & Bieber, 2014). Indeed, national identity can hardly be conceptualized as a matter of rational choice to the same extent or in the same way across all modern European history or even for the highly

diverse regions of early 20th-century Europe. Therefore, scholars investigating processes of nationalization, national disputes or ethnic violence should do both—examine shifts of national attitudes and behaviour from the perspective of rational choice to increase analytical precision and explanatory power, *and* critically reflect upon the reach and applicability of rational choice in the given historical setting.

Strategic nationalism, as suggested here, thus proposes to reconceptualize nationalization processes by shifting the view to the volatile—and historically variable—middle ground between the extremes of complete detachment from nationalist activism (national indifference) and fully fledged national identification. In this contested space, an individual will engage with nationalist pressure by weighing costs and benefits rather than either ignoring or succumbing to it. The resulting actions may align with state policy and, over time, lead to the formation of durable national identities, as has happened, for instance, with most immigrant groups in the United States. Yet, they may also undermine state-building projects, as in Austria-Hungary in 1918 and former Yugoslavia, or create short-lived national allegiances that fall apart after a conflict ends, as has often been the case in wartime collaboration and occupation. The concept of strategic nationalism invites us to focus on the actions and changing identities of the people caught in this middle ground. In terms of historicizing nationalism, it helps us assess with greater precision the shifting boundaries between non-political, fluid and well-established national identities.

People's actions are 'strategic' in that they pursue implicit or explicit political strategies that target nationalist doctrines and policies in a way to serve the actors' interests in a given (and evolving) situation. In the case of Alsace-Lorraine, loosely along the lines of Hirschman's taxonomy, three principal strategies emerged: *manipulating* demands of national loyalty to serve one's personal benefit (for instance by denouncing business competitors or undesirable neighbours as anti-German); *bargaining* with the authorities to improve economic conditions, lift restrictions of personal freedoms or, in a broader sense, to express demands for political change (for instance by the symbolic display of sympathies with France); and *challenging* German rule (for instance by deserting from the army, providing information to French troops or disseminating Allied propaganda). Due to the severe restrictions on political agitation under martial law, there was hardly room for collective strategic action. Yet as will be demonstrated in the following sections, the aggregate effect of a growing number of people withdrawing national support and changing their national preferences eroded the legitimacy of German rule in Alsace-Lorraine and weakened the power of the military authorities.

From the vantage point of strategic nationalism, in times of nationalist conflict, the agency of the people is located in their ability to alter or obstruct the specific national framework created by elites (Laitin, 2007). In wartime Alsace-Lorraine, many local inhabitants thus came to challenge the militarized and authoritarian basis of German nationalism. By the end of the war, many Alsatians and Lorrainers transposed this objection to the German national framework into a strategic preference for France. To the frustration of the French postwar administration, however, the rational basis of this preference also meant that support for France was not an expression of deep-seated French sympathies but a volatile commitment—precisely in the sense of Ernest Renan's famous 'everyday plebiscite'—that was highly sensitive to their government's policy, too.

3 | CREATING THE 'NATIONAL DANGER ZONE'

Although more than 40 years had passed since the Prussian victory over France in 1871, Imperial Germany had not succeeded in fully integrating the 1.8 million inhabitants of its *Reichsland* (imperial country) into the German state by 1914. To be sure, radical separatism had effectively subsided since the Boulanger Crisis in the late 1880s, when a new generation had come of age and the German political parties began to take hold in the region (Harvey, 2001, p.87). By the turn of the century, Alsace-Lorraine had become increasingly tied into the economic, political and cultural German orbit, whereas memories of and attachment to France waned (Grandhomme, 2008b: 21; Preibusch, 2006, p.602; Roth, 2010 p.114). At the same time, however, the *Reichsland* remained in an inferior position to the other German states and had to accept a significant presence of German military and public servants.

As a result, from around the turn of the century, the local population developed a strong sense of regional particularity (Fischer, 2010). The so-called Saverne affair in late 1913, during which parts of a Prussian army contingent stationed in the Alsatian town of Saverne (*Zabern*) cracked down on local civilians with the backing of the German government and the Kaiser, revealed how fragile the region's position in the German nation still was (Preibusch, 2006, pp.486–95, Schoenbaum, 1982). It also eerily foreshadowed the dynamics of martial law during the war and shaped collective perceptions of German military rule as repressive and arbitrary.

When war broke out merely half a year later; however, analogous to the German interior, Alsations and Lorrainers generally complied with the German war effort: mobilization went smoothly,¹¹ there were few desertions¹² and protest rallies in the last days of July—organized primarily by Social Democrats—expressed social, economic and political cleavages rather than anti-German attitudes.¹³ If anything, due to their geographic position and numerous family and business ties across the border, Alsations and Lorrainers tended to be more anxious about the prospect of a war with France, and they were concerned about the changes such a war might bring to the region's status (Husser, 1989, p.34; Spindler, 2008, pp.51, 70–71, 77). In early August 1914, then, German military authorities faced a heated but still open-ended situation in the country's western borderland, where both national confrontation and national solidarity were possible outcomes.

Indeed, the Dallwitz administration at first sought to use the 'Spirit of 1914' narrative to strengthen the ties between the *Reichsland* and the German nation (Evers, 2016, pp.101–111, 127–28). Newspapers ran headlines such as 'Appreciation and gratitude for Alsace-Lorraine' and 'The loyalty of the Lorrainers,' depicting the locals as patriotic and unquestionably German citizens (Der Elsässer, 1914). The unifying narrative was fuelled by the initial support of significant parts of the local population for the German war effort, and it was helped by early German military successes. The first few weeks of the war illustrate that the unifying approach was a serious option for military administrators. Such a policy would have continued to emphasize solidarity in the war, downplayed national tensions and addressed the concerns of Alsations and Lorrainers given their proximity to the front and their hopes for regional autonomy.

The military authorities ultimately did not opt for a policy of reconciliation. Once the offensive in the West had stalled in an immobile labyrinth of trenches, the 'Spirit of 1914' waned. In mid-September 1914, after the German defeat in the Battle of the Marne, the tide turned against the Alsations and Lorrainers (Baechler, 1969, p.54). Newspapers ran stories about 'anti-German behaviour.' Military authorities issued a slew of repressive decrees. They thus exacerbated an already tense situation in which, from the first days of the war, police and military officers on the ground were using blacklists to single out disloyal elements, and police headquarters, newspaper offices and municipalities were flooded by denunciations.¹⁴ Oversensitive to military security and harbouring fears of the 'enemy within,' military authorities henceforth sought to bring the seemingly unruly borderland under control by enforcing unconditional national loyalty.

Consequently, in the paradigm that came to dominate over the course of the war, the authorities viewed Alsace-Lorraine not just as a military but a national danger zone that threatened to sabotage the military effort and national cohesion. As a result of this policy of suspicion, pre-existing tensions between the German rulers and the indigenous population hardened, whereas the hardships of war—malnutrition, physical destruction, military draft, fear of evacuations, restriction of personal and political liberties, and so forth—were increasingly transformed into a conflict along national lines. What in the rest of the country took the shape of political and economic conflict assumed the proportions of national antagonism in Alsace-Lorraine.

4 | POLITICIZING THE PEOPLE: THE EXTRAORDINARY MILITARY COURTS

In Alsace-Lorraine as elsewhere in Germany, military authorities encroached on civil institutions following the outbreak of war and the declaration of martial law. 'Protective custody' (*Schutzhaft*) was the most blatant way of

bypassing the rule of law, but the military authorities also issued a growing number of decrees (*Verordnungen*) that overrode peacetime legislation.¹⁵ These decrees prohibited, among other things, the spreading of sensitive or false news about the war, the use of French in the workplace and public spaces and any sort of 'anti-German' public utterances. Newly established extraordinary military courts (*außerordentliche Kriegsgerichte*) were intended to impose this vision of unequivocal national loyalty on the borderland.

Across Germany, up to 60 extraordinary military courts were operative during the war, located primarily in the sensible western and eastern border zones (Huber, 1992, pp.47–49; Schudnagies, 1994, pp.168–70). These courts were established in 15 of 24 army corps military districts into which German territory had been divided. Eight courts were primarily responsible for Alsace-Lorraine (see Table 2). Each court was staffed by two civilian and three military judges and, for its district, was tasked with the hearing of all cases where civilians were accused to have breached wartime regulations and decrees. According to government statistics, by mid-1918, the extraordinary military courts in Prussia alone had heard 112,080 cases (Huber, 1992, p.48). The files of the military administration of Alsace-Lorraine contain the names of 2,249 persons tried for anti-German behaviour in extraordinary military courts during the war.¹⁶

In the second half of the war, criticism of the courts' proceedings mounted, particularly among Alsatian and Lorrainer members of parliament and the Social Democrats. In a *Reichstag* debate in May 1918, for instance, Social Democrat deputy Otto Landsberg cited the case of a waitress who, after using a French word when serving a guest from the German interior (*Altdeutscher*), replied to the guests' reprimand: 'I speak German, but inside I think and feel French.'¹⁷ According to Landsberg, the court sentenced the waitress to 3 months in prison. Even more striking was Landsberg's second example, which involved a locksmith named Mannshardt who had complained about the German 'war bread' in a local Alsatian pub, exclaiming that 'they make you pay taxes but don't give you anything to eat; and for that they expect you to sing: "*Lieb' Vaterland, magst ruhig sein!* (Dear fatherland, you may be calm)"¹⁸ His sentence was 8 months in prison.

Historians have tended to extrapolate from such cases to a general verdict on German rule in Alsace-Lorraine during the war. In this view, the region was subdued to a relentless system of military justice geared to issuing sweeping penalties and arbitrary judgements on a mostly passive local population (Grandhomme, 2008b, p.25; Kramer, 2002, p.110; Rossé et al., 1936, pp.258–60). Careful examination of the extraordinary military courts' proceedings indicates, however, that military policies were more ambivalent and people's attitudes more volatile than these assessments suggest.

Sentences for anti-German behaviour varied considerably in severity (see Table 1).¹⁹ Most strikingly, 21.4% of all trials ended in the acquittal of the accused, usually due to lack of evidence. In 40.4% of cases, the defendants received comparatively light sentences of between 1 day and 1 month in prison.²⁰ In 38.3% of cases, finally, the courts passed heavier sentences of between 2 months and the maximum penalty of 1 year in prison. There are no significant changes of these patterns over the course of the war.

Another important finding is the strong regional variation in the courts' proceedings (see Table 2).²¹ Although only representing 27.6% of the population, Upper Alsace around Mulhouse and Colmar saw almost half of all trials (49.4%). In turn, Lower Alsace around Strasbourg and notably the Moselle (Lorraine) region around Metz saw disproportionately fewer cases.²² Upper Alsace's prominence might be due to its traditionally strong Francophile bourgeoisie and business links to France, yet it is doubtful that these factors alone can account for the size of the disparity. Even more puzzling are the low figures for Lorraine, given the region's significant proportion of French-speaking districts. Expecting substantial opposition to the war effort from precisely these areas, the German authorities initially

TABLE 1 Sentences of the military courts (in percent)

Acquittal	1–7 days in prison	2–4 weeks in prison	2–5 months in prison	6 months and more in prison
21.4	17.3	23.1	23.7	14.6

TABLE 2 Regional distribution of the proceedings of the military courts (in percent)

Mulhouse	Colmar	Others	Strasbourg	Others	Metz	Thionville	Others	Saarbrucken	Others
34.9	10.2	4.3	24.1	0.7	11.2	8.1	0.3	5.8	0.3
Upper Alsace			Lower Alsace		Lorraine			Inner Germany	
49.4			24.8		19.6			6.1	

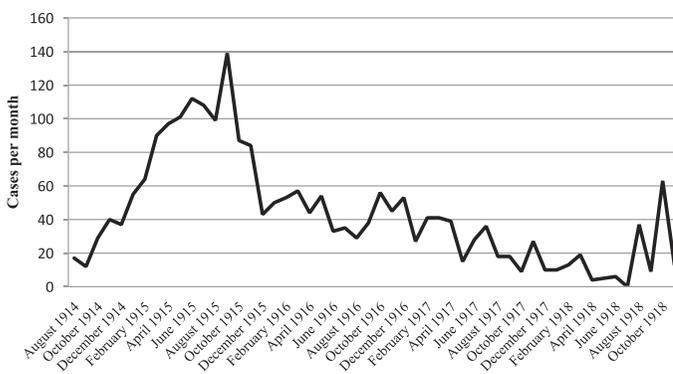
focused on Francophile leaders in Lorraine.²³ Yet as the work of the courts demonstrates, they quickly shifted their focus to Upper Alsace.

The most likely explanation for these regional variations lies in the proximity of the war. Upper Alsace had more cases because the German military authorities placed high emphasis on 'cleansing' this vulnerable region of anti-German elements.²⁴ In addition, the local population was much more exposed to the war than the inhabitants of Lorraine and Lower Alsace. A significant proportion of Upper Alsace was held by the French army, and for many others, the front was in the immediate vicinity. 'In Strasbourg, they have no idea of the constraints that the war imposes,' Philippe Husser (1989, p.53) remarked after talking to a friend from Strasbourg in October 1914. By this time, Husser's city, Mulhouse, had passed twice from German to French control and back, and it remained under constant threat of mass evacuation until the end of the war (Prott, 2014). One may therefore surmise that the population of Upper Alsace suffered more from the hardships of war, was more heavily affected by the national suspicion on the part of the military authorities and, not least, was more alert to the French alternative, explaining the disproportionately higher number of cases.

Close examination of individual trials suggests, moreover, that sentences were not just the result of an arbitrary system of military justice. Rather, penalties depended on a wide range of factors: the evidence available; the reliability of witnesses; the context and type of offence (whether it had occurred in public or in private, repeatedly or only once, in intoxicated or sober state, in proximity to militarily sensitive areas or not); the defendant's age, gender, criminal record and social status (to determine whether he or she was an influential and politically or militarily 'dangerous' figure); and the defendant's political and national attitude (*Gesinnung*).²⁵ What the courts punished most severely was organized military and political resistance against the German war effort and the military authorities.²⁶ In contrast, speaking French, even in public, was considered a minor offence or no offence at all if it clearly had no political intent or occurred in an area with a majority of French speakers.

The number of trials for anti-German behaviour increased rapidly after August 1914 (see Figure 1).²⁷ The number of trials peaked 1 year into the war, in September 1915, when the extraordinary military courts heard a total of 139 cases. Strikingly, however, the number of cases then decreased, reaching a low point in April 1918 with four trials. It is only towards the end of the war that the numbers picked up again, albeit on a lower level.

The decline after September 1915 defies claims that repression and violence against the civilian population escalated across the board. It indicates that a tense but still open-ended early phase of the war in August and

**FIGURE 1** Proceedings of the extraordinary military courts in Alsace-Lorraine, 1914–1918

September 1914—when German victory over France seemed close and the political leaders praised fraternity between Alsatians, Lorrainers and Germans—gave way to a policy of enforcing unconditional national loyalty. From October 1914, as the military authorities began issuing more decrees, they met with popular resistance, causing a surge in trials. The further growing number of trials points to a 'hot' first year of the war, when many citizens responded publicly to the war. The decline of cases from September 1915 appears to reflect a cooling down of the political climate and the reluctant compliance of most people with the new rules. The spike in the final months of the war, finally, likely reflects renewed movement at the front and Germany's weakening control over the region. Overall, these results testify to the strong influence that both government policy and the fortunes of war exerted on the actions and attitudes of the local population.

The behaviour of the people as reflected in the work of the extraordinary military courts highlights the strategic character of national attitudes. Many people quickly began acting upon the administration's dictum of national loyalty. Pursuing a strategy of *manipulation*, some denounced neighbours or business competitors in decidedly nationalist terms as anti-German or 'pro-French' to settle personal scores or for personal profit—a pattern that repeated itself in reverse after the war (Boswell, 2000; Grohmann, 2005; Harvey, 1999; Prott, 2016; Schmauch, 2008). Others enlisted voluntarily in the German army not out of enthusiasm for the war or Germany but to anticipate military draft and to be able to choose the location of their deployment (Grandhomme & Grandhomme, 2013, p.106). The transcripts of numerous trials indicate that many people pursued a strategy of *bargaining* with the authorities by deliberately using French symbols to provoke them—from using French language inscriptions in shops and on letterheads and shouting 'Vive la France' right up to publicly singing the Marseillaise. In contrast to the predominantly social and political opposition in the German interior (Keil & Stibbe, 2020), this nationalized form of protest in Alsace-Lorraine undermined and, in some cases, openly *challenged* the legitimacy of German rule. In sociological terms, a growing number of people began to reject the government's national 'definition of the situation' (Cast, 2003, pp.186–87; Norton, 2014, pp.167–68).

A particularly striking example of such strategic nationalism can be found in the diary of the Alsatian soldier Dominik Richert (2012), who over the course of the war transitioned from national indifference and bargaining with the authorities right up to challenging German rule. A peasant from Mulhouse, Richert, like many other Alsatians and Lorrainers, was a decidedly non-political person, which repeatedly brought him into conflict with his superiors. The longer the war lasted, the more Richert developed a pacifist attitude. In May 1918, stationed at the Western front and exhausted from nearly 4 years of fighting, Richert mentioned to his lieutenant that he really did not care who would win, if only the war ended. Further questioned about his motives, Richert (2012, p.224) explicitly challenged the military's claim on his national loyalty: "Sir," I answered, "the war can end any way it likes. If I live to the end of the war, I am certain to be among the victors." "How come?" asked the astonished lieutenant. "It's quite simple," I replied. "I come from Alsace. If Germany wins, Alsace will continue to be German and we will be with the winners. If the others win, then Alsace will become French and we will also be with the winners!" In late July 1918, Richert successfully defected to the French. His strategic engagement with nationalist pressure demonstrates that within certain confines, locals were able to turn the ambivalence surrounding their national allegiance from a liability into an asset—choosing or flirting with the other side, they could challenge and ultimately escape claims of unconditional national loyalty.

German military authorities refused to engage in this sort of bargaining. The extraordinary military courts, for all their observance of legal procedure and passing of graded judgements, were guided by the perception that any form of deviant behaviour potentially constituted a form of national opposition and had to be eliminated. Consequently, they interpreted complaints about the rationing and quality of food, the insistence on religious freedom (Jantzen, 2010, pp.87, 94–95) or criticism of military draft and restrictions of personal liberties not as invitation to political dialogue or pragmatic problem-solving but as military threat and rejection of German rule as such. In a case that was both typical and remarkable, the court in Strasbourg sentenced Wilhelm Zuckschwert, a 41-year-old invalid and former railway official, to 9 months in prison for 'anti-German utterances.' On 9 April 1918, in a local pub, Zuckschwert had shouted at workers from an ammunition factory, demanding that they stop their work and thus

help to end the hunger and the dying brought about by the war.²⁸ Zuckschwert's defence lawyer pleaded not guilty, arguing that his client's statements were the expression of a general aversion to war (*'kriegsfeindlich'*), not to Germany as a nation (*'deutschfeindlich'*). This argument prompted the judges to produce a sophisticated, three-page-long verdict in which they explained that the defendant, by making these statements, wilfully accepted the disruption of the production of ammunition and hence the military defeat of Germany. Thus, they concluded, Zuckschwert was driven by a dangerous anti-German attitude and should be punished severely. By framing war-related grievances as anti-German behaviour, the courts helped create the nationalist opposition they so eagerly sought to single out and suppress (Jahr, 1998, p.258; Preibusch, 2006, p.523).

The trial transcripts demonstrate that many people reacted to this national framing of war-related protest in a subversive manner: they expected something in return for their loyalty. The above-cited example of the locksmith Mannshardt, who lamented high taxes and lack of food supply while being expected to show a patriotic attitude, is a case in point. Implicitly, Mannshardt attached conditions to his national devotion, reflecting a voluntarist or rather pragmatic understanding of national identity that the military authorities were unwilling to accept. In another typical case, Viktorine Foltz, a farmer from Mulhouse, was sentenced to 6 days in prison for complaining in a letter to her brother about the behaviour of German troops stationed in Alsace: 'How can they expect you to feel patriotism and love for such a god-forsaken people? They (German soldiers) force the poor people out of their villages so they can loot and steal. ... Hopefully the time will come when we will get rid of the Prussians.'²⁹ Like many others, Foltz used national loyalty as a bargaining chip, demanding benefits—in this case, decent treatment by the military—in return for her patriotism.

5 | MODERATING POLICY, UNLEASHING MASS DISAFFECTION

Although the German military administrators treated the *Reichsland* as national danger zone or even outright as enemy territory, they refused to even consider the 'question' of Alsace-Lorraine—that is, at this point, the legitimacy of their control of the region. In their 'possession' of and future plans for Alsace-Lorraine, German leaders thought like imperialists. Instead of promising the Alsatians and Lorrainers an attractive future, policymakers in Strasbourg and Berlin were busy making secret plans to extend martial law beyond the end of the war and to partition Alsace-Lorraine, ending the region's democratic character and dividing its autonomist movement (Preibusch, 2006, pp.519–68). All attempts to convince the government and key ministries of the urgent need to change course to safeguard what was left of Germany's claim to the region met with fierce resistance and incomprehension (Prott, 2016, pp.64–65; Ritter, 1973, pp.129–44).

Instead, politicized and increasingly alienated by German authoritarian nationalism, Alsatians and Lorrainers were courted by French propaganda, offering them full rights in the French state as well as the respect of local particularities (Baechler, 1988, pp.191–201; Fischer, 2004, pp.211–213; Rossé et al., 1936, pp.433–453; Smith, 1993; Vlossak, 2010, p.139). The contrast between the French promise to liberate the 'lost provinces' from German despotism, on the one hand, and the haphazard German attempts to 'quickly cleanse (especially) Upper Alsace of all unreliable elements,'³⁰ on the other, was not lost on contemporaries (Husser, 1989, p.47; Spindler, 2008, pp.78, 544; Zundel, 2004, pp.35, 60).

It should be noted, however, that despite their rhetoric of deliverance and promises to safeguard the region's autonomy and local particularities, French policymakers were themselves driven by the notion of the clear-cut French character of the borderland and, like their German counterparts, claimed the unambiguous national allegiance of the population. In a reversal of perspective but not of substance, for instance, French wartime propaganda interpreted the proceedings of the German extraordinary military courts as testaments to the unalterably French sentiments of the Alsatians and Lorrainers (Fribourg, 1918). Upon their arrival in Alsace-Lorraine in late November 1918, French rulers considered the question of Alsace-Lorraine closed (Carrol, 2019, p.133; Fischer, 2010, pp.128–129; Prott, 2016, pp.148–149) and sought to erase the traces of German rule by mass expulsions of German citizens

(Harvey, 1999; Grohmann, 2005; Prott, 2016, pp.166–170) and rapid assimilation of the region into a centralized French political, legal and cultural framework (Carrol, 2018; Fischer, 2010, pp.128–151; Rossé et al., 1936, pp.471–487; Roth, 2010, pp.158–161). Yet although the war was still going, it was the perception of France as a modern, democratic and most likely militarily victorious alternative to a reactionary and defeated Germany in economic and political turmoil that mattered to Alsatians and Lorrainers.

As several reports from local administrators indicate, the changing tide of the war and the more lenient approach of the police and military authorities directly correlated with increasing public display of sympathies for France. From mid-1917, public use of French increased, even in some German-speaking areas. On 9 August 1918, for instance, a secret police unit in Lorraine reported that until mid-1917, the French-speaking inhabitants of the region around Thionville and Metz had still made the effort to speak German. Ever since, however, most people had given up. Remarkably, the report listed the cessation of denunciations and the toleration of French language sermons as principal reasons.³¹ A report by the Army High Command in Metz confirmed this assessment: as the authorities relieved the ‘pressure’ and ‘interventions’ stopped, the use of French increased dramatically, so that even in Dieuze (*Duß*), a small town where most people knew German, ‘French is the only language spoken.’³² In a remarkably lucid third report, the chief of the military police in Metz reflected on the upsurge of the public use of French. According to the report, not only was the increasing use of French directly connected to the situation at the front but the local population also perceived of the return of expellees and detainees as signs that the German military was losing control. To the frustration of the administrators, the population did not welcome these measures or regain trust in a supposedly more liberal and benevolent German government:

The local population is convinced that Germany will lose the war and be forced to return Alsace-Lorraine. It is striking how in times of less favourable news from the front, the public use of French immediately increases. According to observers familiar with local circumstances and attitudes, the growing public use of French is also caused by the return of numerous people to the region who had previously been deemed politically unreliable and expelled from Metz.³³

In the final months of the war, the military authorities increasingly lamented the ‘depressed mood’ of the local population: ‘Even patriotic Alsatians and Germans from the interior, especially public servants, have become entirely apathetic and disheartened. The patriotism of many has indeed severely suffered.’³⁴ On 6 November 1918, reflecting on the failures of the German wartime administration, Spindler (2008, p.768) noted that natives of Baden or Bavaria, too, would have become resentful of German rule if put under a similar regime of national suspicion.

6 | CONCLUSION

Speaking to an enthusiastic crowd in Strasbourg in early December 1918, French President Raymond Poincaré declared that ‘*le plébiscite est fait*’ (the plebiscite is done) (Le Temps, 1918, p.2). As the French authorities would soon realize, however, the revival of French sentiments in the ‘lost provinces’ of Alsace-Lorraine was less the expression of deep-rooted Francophile feelings of the people but rather the reflection of a more immediate and volatile political commitment created by specific wartime experiences. The mass display of affinities to France shortly after the war was the consequence of a conflict-ridden and contradictory process by which the German state had sought to simultaneously mobilize and subdue its borderland population.

The local inhabitants were far from passive spectators in this process. Facing the military authorities’ obsession with national loyalty and acting in a total war setting, many citizens were drawn, or rather forced, into modern national politics. As Alison Carrol (2018, p.17) notes in her recent monograph on post-WWI Alsace, after the return of the French in November 1918—and, arguably, well before then—“indifference” to the nation (had become)

impossible (or at the very least very difficult).’ Indeed, as this article has demonstrated, many locals were quick to respond to the attempts of the military authorities to impose national loyalty literally by decree. Denouncing neighbours as anti-German, locals sought to capitalize on the climate of national suspicion and manipulate demands of unconditional national loyalty to settle personal scores and present themselves as loyal citizens. Insulting the Kaiser or singing the *Marseillaise*, in turn, were ways to express war-related grievances in an effective, nationally charged manner. Seen in this light, these latter can be understood as an effort to provoke and bargain with the authorities and demand a say in the political future of the region, to have a ‘voice’ in Hirschman’s terms—a debate that the authorities sought to stifle by all means (Baechler, 1969, pp.116–118). Others, finally, openly challenged German rule. Taken together, these politicized actions by local inhabitants contributed to create an atmosphere of national suspicion and subversion that increasingly divided the people from their rulers and confirmed the military’s worst fears. Thus undermining the ideal of unconditional popular obedience, the strategic nationalism of the local population exposed the limits of an inflexible, authoritarian German doctrine of national loyalty that found itself increasingly in competition with a seemingly more democratic and liberal French alternative.

German rule in Alsace-Lorraine during the WWI failed to mobilize mass national support precisely because the military administration did not come to terms with the strategic nationalism of the borderland population. When the promised quick German victory failed to materialize and with no end in sight to the hardships of war, support for the German military effort gradually eroded. Wedded to a paternalistic and militarized view of the nation and convinced of the unreliable national character of the borderland, German rulers were unwilling to manage local discontent about wartime conditions in a pragmatic manner and to offer the people an attractive future in the German state. Instead, they politicized and nationally polarized attitudes by framing people’s war-related social, economic and political grievances as expressions of disloyalty to the war effort and, by extension, to the German nation. What is more, they alienated the population through a plethora of decrees, protective custody and expulsions that undermined legal security and discredited German rule. From the spring of 1917, finally, the government began moderating repressive measures—yet leaving the underlying authoritarian nationalist doctrine unchanged, half-hearted moderation only fostered overt hostility to German rule and set the stage for the triumphant arrival of French troops in late November 1918.

Strategic nationalism as proposed here is a powerful analytical tool to examine and explain such rapid and often contradictory changes of national affiliation in settings of conflict and war. It allows us to see the people not merely as bystanders but as drivers of nationalizing projects in 19th and 20th century Europe (Bergholz, 2013, p.703). It invites us to explore these nationalizing projects with greater analytical precision as it shifts our attention to crucial but underresearched aspects of the changing relationship between the people and the state: the strategies people pursued in response to state policy and changing external circumstances; the forms of political action they chose; the extent to which a population was politicized; the repercussions of people’s actions on policymaking and narratives of national identity; the extent to which people’s strategic choices helped create or transform their national identities and, in turn, the extent to which existing national identities ‘framed’ citizens’ actions and attitudes. Focussing on strategic nationalism and the micromechanisms of nationalization processes will provide new insights into the ways in which regular citizens managed, navigated and themselves shaped the current of nationalism in the modern era.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Minutes of the 169th session of the German *Reichstag*, 7 June 1918 (Reichstag, 1918, p.5270). Online available at <http://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/index.html> (Accessed 19 March 2020). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
- ² The figures are from Hiery (1986, p.447). To be sure, notably the Social Democrats attracted some anti-German protest votes. Yet overall, they and the other major parties clearly supported Alsace-Lorraine to remain with Germany (Harvey, 2001, pp.87–103; Hiery, 1986, p.441).
- ³ Report on Alsace-Lorraine in the third quarter of 1914 until the end of 1915 by the *Statthalter* (chief civilian administrator) of Alsace-Lorraine, Johann von Dallwitz, dated 4 February 1916, Bundesarchiv Berlin (henceforth BAArch), R43, 168a.
- ⁴ For a discussion of national indifference, see the section 'Alsace-Lorraine and strategic nationalism' below.
- ⁵ See the older works by Rossé, Stürmel, Bleicher, Deiber and Keppi (1936), Baechler (1969), Wahl and Richez (1993) and Hiery (1986). More recently, Harvey (1999), Boswell (2000), Grohmann (2005), Grandhomme (2008a), Roth (2010), Fischer (2010) and Carrol (2018), among others, have explored the elusive character of collective identities in Alsace and Lorraine.
- ⁶ An excellent example of a such a microlevel study of rapid shifts of national allegiance is Bergholz (2013).
- ⁷ Population figures for Alsace-Lorraine are based on the 1910 census (Rossé, Stürmel, Bleicher, Deiber, & Keppi, 1938, p.37).
- ⁸ According to figures communicated in the German parliament, by April 1918, 700 of 1,900 expellees from Alsace-Lorraine had returned to their homes and only 67 of 1,640 persons remained in protective custody (Reichstag, 1918, p.5283).
- ⁹ It should be noted that some scholars contend that nationalism has both rational and irrational elements and is as much about symbolic acknowledgement and dignity as it is about tangible economic gains (Kecmanovic, 2005; Varshney, 2003).
- ¹⁰ On shifts in national allegiance in the context of the First World War, see also the contributions in Wouters and van Ypersele (2018).
- ¹¹ The orderly course of mobilization and compliance to the war effort is confirmed by several sources; see, for example, the report by the *Kreisdirektor* (district chief) of Gebweiler (Guebwiller, Upper Alsace), 5 August 1914, Archives départementales du Bas Rhin, Strasbourg (henceforth ADBR), 21 AL 2; Johann von Dallwitz, Report on Alsace-Lorraine in the last quarter of 1914 until the end of 1915, 4 February 1916, BAArch, R43, 168a.
- ¹² For instance, the report by the chief of the Landwehrbezirk Molsheim in Alsace, Delévièleuse, dated 6 February 1915, ADBR, 22 AL 119, stated that only four of 1,055 recruits (0.38%) in his district had failed to enlist for military duty when the war broke out. Similarly, Jahr (1998, p.254) calculated a desertion rate of 0.46% for Alsace-Lorraine in 1905.
- ¹³ The Social Democrat newspaper *Freie Presse für Elsaß-Lothringen* provided the most extensive coverage of these anti-war demonstrations.
- ¹⁴ According to the minutes of the Conference of Bingen of June 1917, where civilian and military administrators discussed present measures and future policy in Alsace-Lorraine, police and military officials had made 160 arrests based on 'black-lists' in the beginning of the war (annex to the minutes of the Bingen Conference, ADBR, 22 AL 131). For examples of anonymous letters of denunciation, see ADBR, 116 AL 45.
- ¹⁵ The XIV Army Corps alone issued 123 decrees until 1 March 1918 (*Verordnungen des stellvertretenden Generals XIV. Armeekorps nach §9b des Gesetzes über den Belagerungszustand*, 1 March 1918, GLA Karlsruhe, 456 F3 93).
- ¹⁶ See the list in ADBR, 87 AL 5735, and the detailed discussion below in this section.
- ¹⁷ Minutes of the 165th session of the German Reichstag, 14 May 1918 (Reichstag, 1918, p.5150), also for the following quotation.
- ¹⁸ This was a popular verse of the nationalist song *Die Wacht am Rhein* (*The Watch at the Rhine*).
- ¹⁹ The figures are based on an examination of 295 individual cases from ADBR, 87 AL 5869, 5928, 5633 and 5555.
- ²⁰ Following the introduction of *Lex Schiffer* on 11 December 1915, defendants were able to avoid prison sentences by paying a fine (Huber, 1992, p.47).
- ²¹ These figures are based on an examination of 295 individual cases from ADBR, 87 AL 5869, 5928, 5633 and 5555. The extraordinary military court in Saarbrücken just across the border to inner Germany also heard cases involving inhabitants of nearby Lorraine.
- ²² Data on the population of Alsace-Lorraine are from the 1910 census, showing a total of 1,874,014 inhabitants: 700,938 (37.4%) in Lower Alsace, 517,865 (27.6%) in Upper Alsace and 655,211 (35%) in Lorraine. Of the entire population of Alsace-Lorraine, 295,436 (15.8%) were from the German interior (Rossé et al., 1938, pp.37, 46).

- ²³ At the outbreak of the war, the military authorities used 'blacklists' to arrest 29 persons in Lower Alsace, 39 in Upper Alsace and 92 in Lorraine (today's Moselle département). See the annex of the minutes of the Conference of Bingen of June 1917, ADBR, 22 AL 131.
- ²⁴ Hans Gaede, memorandum dated 26 April 1915, GLA Karlsruhe, 456 F3 97.
- ²⁵ A full discussion of all these factors is beyond the scope of this article. It would be a fruitful avenue for further research to investigate wartime court records, not just in Alsace-Lorraine, in view of how notably class and gender affected people's strategies for dealing with demands of national loyalty.
- ²⁶ See, for example, the trials of Emil Stein, 23 September 1915, Saarbrücken, and Heinrich Teutsch, 27 March 1918, Metz, ADBR, 87 AL 5928.
- ²⁷ Source: alphabetical list of the proceedings of the extraordinary military courts in ADBR, 87 AL 5735. The list contains 2,249 cases from the first days of August 1914 right up to the last days of the war in November 1918.
- ²⁸ Trial of Wilhelm Zuckschwert, 2 September 1918, Strasbourg, ADBR, 87 AL 5555.
- ²⁹ Trial of Viktorine Foltz, 13 March 1918, Mulhouse, ADBR, 87 AL 5555.
- ³⁰ Hans Gaede, memorandum dated 26 April 1915, GLA Karlsruhe, 456 F3 97.
- ³¹ Report by the secret field police in the sector of the 19th Army, 9 August 1918, Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart (henceforth HA Stuttgart), M 30/1 Bü 104.
- ³² Report written by commander-in-chief of the 19th Army, Felix von Bothmer, 20 August 1918, HA Stuttgart, M 30/1 Bü 104.
- ³³ Chief of the military police to the governorate of the stronghold of Metz, 6 August 1918, HA Stuttgart, M 30/1 Bü 104.
- ³⁴ Army Headquarters, Memorandum on popular attitudes in Upper Alsace, 21 September 1918, GLA Karlsruhe, 456 F3 1129.

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