

France and the Saar, 1680-1948

BY
LAING GRAY COWAN, Ph.D.



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BY
LAING GRAY COWAN

For
J. G. C.
and
J. R. C.

PREFACE

THE conflicting claims of France and Germany to the tiny but nevertheless vitally important area of the Saar Basin have given rise to an enormous amount of literature on both sides, each seeking to provide a sound historical basis for its respective claim. French and German scholars have delved assiduously into the oldest available records, some of which go back as far as the tenth century and each has found these same records to be a substantiation of his own national claim. Over the heads of the people of the Saar the controversy has raged for centuries and, as must all peoples of a long disputed border, they have philosophically accepted the domination of whichever power could make its will prevail. Only rarely have the Saarlanders been asked to whom they would belong, were free choice given and even from the rare opportunity for self expression, little can be learned of the true feeling of the people for only too often the vote has been calculated to please that power which at the time promised the best prospect of peace and security.

The present study is not an attempt to substantiate either the French or the German historic claim but rather to sort out from the mass of conflicting propaganda, which has been produced on both sides, the facts of the case. If the historic claim is weighed objectively, the evidence would undoubtedly force the outsider to the conclusion that the German case far outweighs that of France. However, even the most neutral observers must at the same time recognize that, in the light of past events, the French claim to influence in the Saar has some validity. Nor can the fact of a legitimate French interest in the Saar for economic and security reasons be denied. Like most questions of international politics, the Saar problem has no answer in black and white; the solution must inevitably be found somewhere between the two absolutes. Europe hoped that a workable compromise had been found in the arrangement

established by the Treaty of Versailles, yet it provided no lasting answer. Perhaps the new plan of economic unification combined with limited political sovereignty which has been devised by France since the end of the second World War will be a compromise more capable of withstanding external political pressures than was the international regime of 1920.

For the original suggestion for this study I am indebted to my colleague, Dr. Robert W. Binkley, Jr. I am particularly indebted to Professor Michael T. Florinsky, of Columbia University, who made available to me his private collection of documents on the work of the Governing Commission of the Saar and, as any student of the Saar problem must be, to the thorough research of the American member of the Saar Plebiscite Commission, Miss Sarah Wambaugh. For helpful suggestions and criticisms I owe thanks to Professors Franz Neumann and John Wuorinen, of Columbia. My thanks are also due to Mrs. Margaret Chalmers and Miss Rebecca Held for their help in the preparation of the manuscript.

The securing of material for the final chapter was greatly facilitated by the kindness of French officials in the Saar, who confirmed in personal conversations impressions I had already gained through research in published materials. I am particularly grateful to the Director General of the Mining Administration, who placed certain much needed statistical materials at my disposal and who permitted me to visit coal mines and industrial plants in the Saar.

Finally, I should like to express my deepest gratitude to Provost Grayson L. Kirk, of Columbia, to whom I owe my first interest in international relations and without whose constant guidance and help over a period of years this study would never have been undertaken.

Needless to say, the opinions and interpretations expressed are solely mine. All translations from the French and German, unless otherwise specifically noted, are my own. Since the spelling of names of people and places in the Saar varies with

the origin of individual books and documents, I have adopted, for the sake of uniformity, the German spelling throughout, except where reference is to a French-created political organ or unit which does not appear in German form. Where there is a commonly used English equivalent for the German it has been substituted.

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CHAPTER I

THE SAAR AND THE SAARLANDERS

THE tiny strip of territory forming the basin of the Saar river has been, for centuries, a focal point for the conflict between the two great neighbors on either side. Long before the modern national states of France and Germany came into existence, the Saar was the route of invading armies seeking to conquer the plains of Lorraine or the hills westward toward the Rhine. The heights bordering the eastern bank of the river have echoed to the marching feet of Roman legions, the shouts of invading tribes from Germany and the clang of the medieval armor of the knights of France and the Holy Roman Empire. The importance of the role of the Saar in European history comes not from its size (up until 1945, its total area was about seven hundred square miles) but from its strategic location and the natural mineral wealth to be found within its borders. Long before the coal of the Saar gave the territory new value in the eyes of France and Germany, its strategic position covering the road to the heart of France made it the object of an unceasing struggle between the kings of France and the princes beyond the Rhine.

The territory extends along both banks of the Saar river which flows quietly through the south west corner. The river enters the territory at Saargemünd, runs through both the chief cities, Saarbrücken and Saarlouis¹ and finally, below Merzig, takes a magnificent curve to flow northward to the Moselle. The greater part of the territory, as well as the large majority of the population are to be found on the western side of the river. The east bank, which in some places is only two or three miles from the French border, is less closely settled, being re-

¹ The name of the city has undergone several variations depending on the possessor of the land at different times; the one here used appears generally on modern maps.

stricted by the heavy forests of the Warndt, a small but very rich coal area jutting into Lorraine, which, until very recent times has been kept untouched as a reserve by the Prussian state mining administration. The edge of the Lorraine plateau, marked by low hills entering the Territory west of the Warndt and passing a few miles from Saarlouis, continues west to Merzig where it is lost in the deep river gorge. On the west bank rolling hills rise to the heights of the Hunsrück, famous in many military campaigns in the Saar.

The most important industrial sections of the territory are located in the central and southwestern parts; the north and north east, part of which was previously a section of the Bavarian Pfalz, is largely agricultural. The coal seams begin not far from Homburg and extend across the valley into the Warndt and Lorraine. The chief deposits practicable for exploitation lie along the river valley at a moderate depth of 300 to 600 metres but unfortunately the seams are in no place very thick so that a relatively large amount of labor is required in production. Moreover the coal is of an inferior grade and cannot compare in quality with that of the nearby Ruhr. The total resources of Saar coal have been estimated at over thirty billion tons,² so that, even if present annual extraction rates are maintained, the supply is assured for several centuries. It is to be expected that the cost of exploitation will, of course, rise as operations are carried on in seams at greater and greater depth. The mining of coal in the Saar has been from earliest times a state enterprise, as it remains today.

The Saar's second industry, iron and steel production, was based originally on the combination of local iron ore deposits and native coal and grew up in close proximity to the coal districts. Today, however, the steel plants of the Saar are more than eighty per cent dependent on the *minette* ore of Lorraine, so that, whatever may be the political status of the Saar, the

² Estimate of the Geological Congress meeting at Toronto, Canada in 1913.

future of the steel industry rests on the existence of an arrangement which will keep this source of raw materials available. The industry is concentrated in four main centres, Dillingen, Völklingen, Burbach and Brebach, in the southwest along the river, with important works also at St. Ingbert, and Neunkirchen.

Several smaller industries have grown up making use of the natural resources to be found in the territory, particularly ceramics and glassware. Both are ancient Saar industries, having been in existence before the advent of the French Revolution but neither has grown as quickly in importance as have coal and steel, due partly to lack of sufficient quantities of raw materials and partly to restricted markets. The industrial development of the Saar in the past century and a half has not been of unmixed benefit to the Saarlanders. The discovery of the industrial uses of coal undoubtedly meant new prosperity with the rise in wage levels and the employment of greater numbers of men in the mines and factories. But on the other hand, like the treasure of the Nibelungen, industrialization brought with it misfortune, for the growing realization of the value of the Saar as a potential raw material source as well as a strategic outpost made the contest for its possession by the neighbors of both sides even keener. In the case of the Saarlanders, the tragedy of the borderland people between two rival nations was made all the more pointed through the discovery of the natural wealth of the soil beneath their feet.

The Saar basin enjoys the somewhat unenviable distinction of being the most thickly populated area in Europe, with a density of 433 persons per square kilometre in 1933. The population of the territory has grown enormously since the beginning of the industrial era from a figure of 159,000 or 35 per square kilometre in 1816 to 512,000 or over 100 per square kilometre at the turn of the century. In 1939 the total population reached 842,000, a peak from which it has been declining since the end

of the second world war.³ Despite the high population concentration, there is only one large city, the capital, Saarbrücken with a population in 1934 of 132,000. Neunkirchen with 42,000 is next in size while there are only four other centers of over 10,000, St. Ingbert, Saarlouis, Homburg and Merzig.⁴ The reason for the low urban figures is that the Saar miner prefers to live in a smaller community where he can own his own house and small plot of land. The main highway and railroad lines between the industrial towns are almost one continuous village, so that, if all these suburbs were taken into account the figure for the cities of the southwest would rise considerably. To the north and east, the population becomes more sparse as the towns begin to change to the farm and market villages of the agricultural area.

One of the remarkable features of the Saar people is their close attachment to their native soil. With the exception of some infiltration of Swiss and Italians after the Thirty Years War, the only source of immigration to the Saar has been the Prussian labor which came to satisfy the industrial demands of the nineteenth century. There has been scarcely any heavy emigration. A survey conducted by the French military authorities in 1946 revealed that over 83% of the inhabitants were born in the Saar and that, of the 83%, over 50% were descendants of grandparents who had themselves been native Saarlanders. Of the 16% of the population not born in the Saar a large majority was concentrated in commerce and the professions in the cities, only a very small number having entered the mines. The Saar is predominantly Roman Catholic in religion, almost three-quarters of the people belonging to that church; the area is under the supervision of the bishoprics of Trier and

3 Figures from *L'Économie de la Sarre*, Ministère de l'Economie Nationale, Paris, 1947, p. 21, and Kloevekorn, *Das Saargebiet, Seine Struktur, seine Probleme*, Saarbrücken, 1929, p. 40.

4 Figures from W. Cartellieri, in Grabowsky, *Die Grundlagen des Saarkampfes*, Berlin, 1934, p. 85. No post war figures are available but French sources have indicated little change in urban population.

Speyer. The close ties of religion and means of livelihood (over one-third of the working population was employed in the mines in 1939) has made of the Saarlanders an extremely homogeneous group. It is generally agreed that the early Saar stock was of eastern Lorraine origin, although of German culture and language, and their descendants look upon themselves definitely as border people. However, the influx of labor from Germany in the early nineteenth century brought with it a certain amount of Prussian sentiment which is still felt today.

The earliest inhabitants of the Saar basin were the Mediomatrici, a Gallic tribe, whose settlement centered around Metz. However, no concrete evidence of their existence remains today except in the names of brooks, mountains and rivers which are of Celtic origin. The name of the river itself, for example, comes from the Celtic Isar, meaning flowing water.⁵ The era of Roman control in the Saar has left scarcely more trace than did that of the Gauls. The territory remained sparsely settled and there can be no question of an intensive Roman culture such as existed in the nearby Moselle region. The Saar was, in Roman times, as it is today, a centre of communications and the Roman outposts consisted mainly of detachments guarding the military routes. The present city of Saarbrücken itself is the outgrowth of a settlement around the bridge constructed here by the Romans.

German settlement began in the fifth century. After the conquering of the Imperial City of Trier in 411, Germanic tribes, first the Alemanni and later the Franks, poured into the Saar valley to take the place of the native Gauls. The victory of Chlodowig over the Alemanni in 496 decisively gave control over the Saar to the Franks and traces of the long period of their rule can be found in the dialect of the Saarlanders even today. Throughout the Carolingian period the Saar remained a

⁵ Cf. Babelon, *Au Pays de la Sarre*, Paris, 1918, p. 12 ff. and Kloeveborn, *op. cit.*, pp. 69 ff.

part of the Frankish kingdom of Austrasia. With the division of the kingdom by the Treaty of Metz in 843 the Saar went to the middle kingdom of Lothaire and the Treaty of Mersen in 870 made it part of the East Frankish kingdom. In the following two centuries the land was gradually parcelled out in fief by the emperors of the Holy Roman Empire. The *Grafschaft* of Saarbrück, taking in a large part of the present Saar territory, the centre of which was the city of Saarbrücken, was given in fief to the bishop of Metz in the tenth century and later by the bishop to the Counts of Saarbrücken, who were to become one of the largest landholders of Lorraine.

Although the lands of the House of Saarbrücken passed by marriage into the hands of a French family of Lorraine for more than a century from 1235 to 1381 the essentially German culture of the people seems to have been little affected by French influences. The German House of Nassau succeeded in 1381 to the possessions of the House of Saarbrücken but the Counts of Nassau-Saarbrücken saw service almost as frequently in the armies of France as under the banner of the Empire. No real estimate can be made of the extent of the fidelity of the rulers of many of the smaller principalities in this period since it was the custom to play off one side against the other in order to be on the side which would grant them the greatest degree of independence in the autocratic control of their lands. However, the gradual emergence of France in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a consolidated power unit and the rapidly rising star of Louis XIV forced the Counts of Nassau-Saarbrücken to look more and more toward Vienna for protection of their interests.

The basis of the French legal claim to the lands of Nassau-Saarbrücken was a decree of the Emperor Otto III in 999 A.D. giving the territory in fief to the Bishop of Metz.⁶ The claim

⁶ German historians have maintained that the original decree did not include the Nassau-Saarbrücken lands and that research has shown this to be a later interpolation. In any case, it is insisted that an antiquated claim such as this could have no legal validity. Cf. Kloeveborn, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-3.

was revived and reinforced by the recapture in 1552 of the Bishoprics of Metz, Toul and Verdun by Henri III. The House of Nassau-Saarbrücken had become Protestant in 1575 and was, in consequence, involved in the religious quarrel of the Thirty Years War. A Royal Edict of 1662 tried to force the Counts of Nassau-Saarbrücken to swear allegiance to the French throne on pain of having their fief withdrawn and in the face of this new French expansionist pressure the Count looked to the Diet of the Empire at Ravenna for protection. The feeble efforts of the Diet at arbitration of the claim failed and, with the outbreak of the war with Holland in 1672, French troops occupied the town of Saarbrücken. Imperial troops were able to wrest control of the city from the French for a brief period from 1676 to 1678 but it was again retaken in the following year and occupied until after the signing of the Treaty of Nijmegen in 1679.

By this treaty the lands of Nassau-Saarbrücken were restored to the sovereignty of the ruling house but, since the Peace of Münster (1648) was adopted as the basis of the new settlement, this in no way interfered with the French legal claim to the Count's allegiance.⁷ The Peace of Nijmegen left Louis XIV in a dominating position over all the principalities surrounding the Saar Basin including the territory of the Duke of Lorraine, so that their independence was entirely dependent on the sufferance of France. However, instead of forcing submission through immediate military operations, Louis took the advice of his ministers, Croissy and Louvois and succeeded by means of exploiting the legal loopholes of the Peace of Münster in securing the coveted territory by peaceful but no less powerful means.

The entire policy of the *Chambres de Réunion*, the body set up by Louis XIV to validate the French legal claim after the peace of Nijmegen, was based on the obscurity of the terms

⁷ For the text of the Treaty, see Koch, *Abrégé des Traités*, vol. I, 2nd edition, Brussels, 1857, pp. 152 ff.

used in Articles 69 and 70 of the Peace of Münster. By these articles the Emperor ceded to France sovereignty over the Bishoprics of Metz, Toul and Verdun with their surrounding districts;⁸ but at no point does the treaty explain exactly what was meant by the word. There is reason to believe that it was purposely left vague because no final decision could be reached and it has been said that, "There is no disposal of territory in the treaties of Westphalia less clear than that establishing this particular cession."⁹

Croissy immediately saw here a method of recovering for the French Crown many principalities which had in the remote past depended on these three bishoprics and urged, as early as 1663 that steps be taken to press the French legal claim. Scarcely was the ink dry on the Peace of Nijmegen when an edict was published setting up the *Chambres de Réunion* of Alsace, Breisach and Metz, ostensibly in the interests of the Church since the Bishops had requested the King to redefine their feudal rights. The task of the Chambers was to judge as a court of final appeal all cases arising out of complaint by the Bishops of usurpation of their lands. The Chamber of Metz set to work at once and after a cursory examination of the complaints had by the spring of 1680 formally reunited to the French Crown the principalities of Bitsche, Homburg and Veldentz which surrounded the lands of the Count of Nassau-Saarbrücken. Finally after a vain appeal to the Emperor, Countess Eleanora Klara of Nassau-Saarbrücken was forced to appear before the Chamber and make public recognition of the sovereignty of France over her territory.

It shortly became evident to all of Europe that, whatever basis of truth the legal claims might have, it was completely overshadowed by the purely political question of French territorial expansion since there was no apparent end to the succession of claims. The efforts of the Diet of the Empire to

⁸ In French, the word is variously *district* or *finage*.

⁹ Koch, *op. cit.*, p. 102. For the text of the articles, *cf. ibid.*, pp. 102 ff.

obtain redress availed nothing and finally the Truce of Ravenna, signed in 1684, permitted France to retain the disputed territories for twenty years. But the storm provoked by the policy of the Chambers of Reunion was shortly to gain such intensity that France was forced to relinquish her gains a scant fifteen years later.

French historians have defended the policy of Reunion on the ground that it was not an innovation since countless examples can be found of feudal princes demanding before tribunals the execution of misunderstood feudal rights.¹⁰ However, the weight of evidence would seem to prove beyond a doubt that the legal base for the claims was merely an attempt thinly to disguise a pure policy of power. Louvois provoked the rights of the Bishops largely as a cloak for French military ambition. German historians on the other hand dispute both the legal and political basis of the claims advanced by Louis XIV, refusing to allow any justification for a title based on long forgotten feudal rights. French policy in their eyes was merely the first step in the oft-repeated manoeuvre of seizing the Saar territory by force or stealth.¹¹

German commentators on the Reunion period make special point of refuting the French ethnic claim to the Saar. The fact that the area west of the Rhine was once settled by Celts and Romans makes, in their eyes, no case for a later French claim, since, were this justified, the French might equally well have claimed large parts of Germany and England too.¹² It must be admitted that in the tangle of feudal dependencies it was well nigh impossible to distinguish an accurate French border for the region and so far as the people were concerned it made little difference to their own existence whether the prince on whose lands they had settled owed homage to the Emperor or

10 Cf. Babelon, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-9.

11 Cf. Kloevekorn, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

12 Cf. A. Meister, *Frankreich und das Saargebiet im Spiegel der Geschichte*, Munich, 1922, p. 7 ff.

to the King of France. But at the same time it must be noted that, had not the Empire been powerless to resist the might of French armies, the forcible reunion of these principalities would have been impossible for, when matched by the concentrated power of Europe a few years later, France was forced to surrender them.

From 1680 on resistance gradually arose to the limitless claims of the Chambers. The unfortunate attempt to annex the Duchy of Zweibrücken, legally the property of Charles XI of Sweden, sparked the formation of the League of Augsburg and led to the outbreak of war in 1688. Hostilities were opened in September of that year with the invasion of the lands of the Empire by French forces, on the pretext that the Emperor was planning to invade France. Sporadic fighting continued until 1697, when Louis, wearied of the campaign, finally pressed for peace negotiations which resulted in the Treaty of Ryswick, signed October 30, 1697. This document reaffirmed the validity of the Treaty of Westphalia and the Treaty of Nijmegen and provided for the restitution of all lands secured by the reunion policy with the proviso that the Catholic religion should remain undisturbed in these areas. One foothold on the Saar was retained by France, the fortress of Saarlouis with one-half mile of surrounding territory. This single possession, isolated though it was from the mother country for more than fifty years afterward, was destined to provide a French claim to the Saar territory which has been reiterated down to the present day.

The Treaty of Ryswick marked an important point in the history of the Saar. It meant the release of the territory from French occupation although not from French influence. At the same time it meant a reduction of French military pressure on the Saar, for, "it marked a turning point in the frontier policy of the Old Regime. Now efforts were directed toward consolidating and regularizing the frontier rather than toward ex-

tending it." ¹³ The treaty was Europe's first decision over the Saar and for a century following the Saar question retired completely into the shadows.

Louis XIV had meanwhile lost no time in integrating the lands secured for France by the Chambers of Reunion into the overall border defense plans set up by his military engineer, Vauban. One of the line of fortresses which included Phalsburg, Mont-Royal and Landau was to be established in the Saar. The site chosen was that of the present city of Saarlouis, near the ancient village of Wallerfangen (Vaudrevanges) which had been almost totally destroyed by the Thirty Years War.

The city was rapidly built in the three years after 1680 and its inhabitants were drawn from the surrounding countryside. French municipal government organs were set up in 1683 and the city prospered as a centre of local economic activities. Even after its isolation from France by the Treaty of Ryswick, large sums were spent on its fortifications and it was used as a base for French troops during the Seven Years War. It was finally reunited to France on the death of the Duke of Lorraine in 1766.

French influence was also felt in the administrative and economic fields. Efforts were made to encourage various local industries and to bring in technically trained settlers. However, the inducements offered these settlers caused an unjust burden of taxation to fall on those already established so that the native Saarlanders remained generally hostile to French rule. The attempt on the part of French authorities to introduce Catholicism into generally Protestant areas aroused a deep resentment and the religious persecution in the years after 1680 created a bitterness toward the French administration which was still evident a century later.

¹³ P. V. de la Blache, "La Frontière de la Saare" in *Comité d'Etudes*, vol. I, Paris, 1918, p. 83. This study, prepared by a group of eminent French scholars during the war, was meant to provide background information for French negotiators at the peace conference. It is an excellent exposé of French claims to territory on the eastern borders.

The withdrawal of French control did not mean the end of French influence in the Saar. Realizing that, at any moment, they might be toppled from their miniature thrones by the overshadowing power of France, the rulers of the small principalities were forced to accept her political leadership. The development of commercial trade and the attractive brilliance of the French court bound the princes of the Saar inextricably to the French orbit. Without exception the Counts of Nassau-Saarbrücken during the eighteenth century were French both in tastes and education. Undoubtedly, too, there was an element of *Realpolitik* on both sides for, if the position of the Count was dependent on the good will of France, it was equally to the interest of France to have friendly buffer states along her border. French writers adduce this close relationship between the Counts of Nassau-Saarbrücken and the French monarchy as proof of French sympathies in the Saar following the Peace of Ryswick but little of this feeling was shared by the people. The memories of invasion and religious persecution were too strong to be erased in a generation or two and the Germans carefully point out that, "An expression of these friendly relations from the people themselves is nowhere to be found."¹⁴

The German historians insist that at no time did France ever give up the idea of securing the Saar, either by direct invasion or legal subterfuge. In their view, French occupation of the Saar from 1679 to 1697 was merely one expression of the classic French policy of extending her borders to the Rhine. The Saar was an obstacle in the fulfillment of a French dream and in the three centuries following attempts were made again and again to overcome that obstacle.

¹⁴ Pöhlmanns in Kloevekorn, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

CHAPTER II

THE REVOLUTION AND THE FIRST EMPIRE IN THE SAAR

I

THE withdrawal of France from the Saar in 1697 left the land in the undisputed possession of the various ruling houses for almost a century. But French influence was still exerted on the ruling princes; subsidies were paid to them by the French treasury and they served in the armies of France.

The head of the House of Nassau-Saarbrücken from 1741 to 1768, Count Wilhelm Heinrich, played a particular role in the development of the Saar territory during the century. His two chief concerns were the increase of commerce and industry and the beautification of the castle and surroundings of the city of Saarbrücken. In an effort to develop the Saar's resources Wilhelm Heinrich made coal mining a state enterprise and sought to build up an export market. He actively encouraged the iron and glass industries and forced the newly established smelters to use coal, in place of wood. Royal trade schools were set up, foreign firms induced to establish in the Saar and protective tariffs imposed.

The Count's government ". . . bore the stamp of the enlightened absolutism of his time with its many sides of light and shadow."¹ Although he had the best interests of his subjects at heart, he nevertheless hedged in their lives with the most minute regulations, many so petty as to create a constant annoyance in the population. The influence of the Enlightenment of eighteenth century France failed to penetrate beyond the ruling class and the purely German character of the people remained virtually untouched. Little of the intellectual preparation for the Revolution which took place in France can

¹ Ruppertsberg, *Geschichte des Saargebiets*, Saarbrücken, 1923, p. 206.