

A STRANGER IN PARIS

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Germany's Role in Republican France, 1870–1940

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PREFACE



*T*his book represents an attempt to relate, as concisely as possible, a history of the French Third Republic. As its subtitle indicates, particular attention is devoted here to the special relationship between France and Germany in the years between the wars of 1870 and 1940. This emphasis appears to me to be not only useful as an organizing principle but essential for our understanding. In an important sense, as I have elsewhere argued at length with copious footnotes to match, the national history of France ended in the late nineteenth century with the Franco-Prussian War. Thereafter, the experience of the French people was so intimately and inseparably related to that of their closest neighbor that a bilateral perspective becomes unavoidable. For all the contrasts between them, France and Germany together henceforth constituted the heartland of Europe. To be sure, other European nations, not to mention the United States or the French colonies, continued to play a certain part. But none was remotely so influential as Germany in determining the fate of republican France.

The centrality of the German question to French affairs is hardly a novel idea. In fact, dozens of authors have remarked on it. But they generally relegate this notion to the sideline of their concerns, or else they toss it off as self-evident. I have attempted to read and digest

this vast historical literature and to incorporate it into my scheme of things. In doing so, however, I have tried to keep my lens sharply focused on this one main problem—without, at the same time, reducing the analysis to a simplistic formula. Although the facts rarely speak for themselves, in my opinion they do add up to a convincing case that conforms to the evidence.

After some experimentation with various outlines, I settled on a table of contents that contains ten thematic chapters. Consecutive narratives of the Third Republic already abound, and many episodes referred to in these pages have been frequently treated in exhaustive detail (a full bibliography of the Dreyfus Affair alone would doubtless fill up a volume of this size). My intention has been to present a fairly complete overview within a compact space, a picture that emerges more clearly as each interlocking piece is set into place, much like a jigsaw puzzle. If such a procedure does not quite qualify as a methodology, it should at least afford the reader a coherent approach to the course and character of republican France. Without the unifying theme of Germany's role in acting upon and within the Republic, this story would only become a much more random tale of successive events.

Regarding this arrangement, one caveat must be anticipated and allowed: not every piece of the puzzle necessarily has the same size or weight. No argument is made here, for example, that the movement for women's rights in France was heavily influenced by that development in Germany. If anything, it is plausible that German females were even more attached to *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* than their French counterparts. Yet it was they who gained the suffrage sooner than women in France, thereby setting an obvious and attainable goal that was finally to be realized after 1945 at the outset of the Fourth Republic. However one evaluates that achievement, it is surely an indispensable part of any modern European history, a comparative topic just as essential to the whole as, say, economic, diplomatic, or military affairs. All are best seen in a Franco-German or western European context insofar as permitted by the state of research and the amount of available evidence. After 1870, to repeat, an autonomous national history of France is no longer feasible.

Chapter One

AN UNSTABLE PAST



*F*rance's long and twisting road to a republican form of state has fascinated and sustained generations of historians. A complete bibliography of that topic, even under a fairly narrow definition of it, would surely contain several thousand titles. From our current perspective in the early twenty-first century, republicanism may seem to be an eminently suitable mode of government for the French people, the normal reflex of a talented, complex, and sometimes contentious society. But the record shows that the French nation had many miles to run before it settled on a republican solution as the best possible arrangement of public administration. Indeed, after 1870 the lingering aspiration of monarchical and imperial pretenders died hard, and only gradually did the institutions and symbols of a republican ethos in France come to be accepted as permanent.

The periodization of modern French history presents a conundrum that is unlikely ever to produce total agreement. As every browser of a well-stocked library knows, each table of contents in those many volumes at hand appears to be based on a different premise about content and chronology. At which point do we begin and end, and what do we put where? Relevant in that regard is the now fashionable hypothesis of "the long nineteenth century," according to which one must begin at least as early as Napoleon Bonaparte to define the

outer limits of an epoch that lasted until the Great War of 1914. It is a tempting proposition, but there are important reasons to reject it. An appropriate start is to do so.

When the court painter Jacques Louis David conceived a portrait (in several versions) of Bonaparte after his splendid self-coronation in the cathedral of Notre Dame in December 1804, he had the new emperor standing stiffly in front of a desk on which a candle burned low, presumably after a long session of work in the wee hours of dawn. Most conspicuous among the props on display were under the table a volume of *Plutarch's Lives*, on the table a copy of the Napoleonic Code, and across the chair a sword. The first was an obvious allusion to Bonaparte's recent acquisition of his imperial status; the second, to his role as a lawgiver and administrator; and the third, to his prowess as a warlord. These are the fundamental criteria by which to judge his reign.

If the spectacle in Paris (also beautifully portrayed by David) marked the formality of Napoleon's elevation to the French throne, his official role as the nation's leading citizen had already been established long before. One need only refer to the constitution of 1799, which appointed him First Consul of the land and awarded him an extraordinary sway over virtually every aspect of the French state. We do not ordinarily turn to the text of a constitution for amusement, but the unintended humor of that turgid document is hard to miss. The First Consul, for instance, is duly instructed to consult on all matters of government with the Second and Third Consuls—after which the opinion of the First Consul alone shall suffice. Autocracy by any name smells just as sweet, and it was above all this conspicuous trait, merely ratified by the passage from Republic to Empire, that Bonaparte shared with his monarchical predecessors. Thus the French Revolution ended where it began with regal pretensions to absolutism. In that respect, unquestionably, Napoleon's despotic rule was a relapse.

To this conclusion an objection might be raised that the Revolution nonetheless lived on in that second symbol on the emperor's desk, the Code, which guaranteed the equality of all French citizens (except women and workers, that is) before the law. This lofty enlightened principle undoubtedly represented a significant ideological

advance over the segmented and outrageously class-biased court system of the Old Regime. But awkwardly we must ask who actually controlled the appointment of judges to administer justice within this legal structure—to which the correct answer is unambiguously the emperor himself. In fact, his supreme right to appoint and dismiss judges at will had already been fixed in that constitution of 1799 and did not require the award of a caesar's laurel five years later. If one inquires about the most enduring legacy of Napoleonic rule, it was not judicial reform but administrative reorganization. The real jewel in Bonaparte's crown was the prefectural system, an instrument of bureaucratic centralization that gave him an incomparable personal authority throughout France that his royal antecedents, in their day, could only dream of. In that respect, too, the French Revolution brought the aspirations of eighteenth-century monarchy to fruition.

Finally, the sword. A soldier of fortune, Napoleon rose out of the rank confusion and patriotic enthusiasm of the Revolution. He was therefore able to mobilize the French nation militarily as no monarch before him. And, indisputably, his exploits far exceeded in their European dimension even those of Louis XIV. Yet the manner of warfare conducted by him and his opponents between 1789 and 1815 was altogether typical of the eighteenth century, not of the nineteenth. To put this proposition quite simply, Napoleon and Wellington were the last major military commanders whose troop deployment and logistical support did not significantly depend on railroads. Nor did Blücher arrive at Waterloo by train. The realization that the movement of men and material under their direction was entirely by foot or horse-drawn carriage makes their accomplishments all the more astonishing, but it does not make them more modern.

These preliminary observations throw a labeling of "the long nineteenth century" into serious question. Some estimable scholars have defended that periodization to justify the inclusion of the Napoleonic Empire, and perhaps even the Revolution before it, in their analysis of an era that began, they say, in 1789 or about 1800 and lasted until 1914. Such a concept leans heavily on a tautology, however, because every epoch is necessarily a transition from one