

Alsace between France and Germany: 1648 to 1945

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Few European regions have changed sovereignty as often as Alsace. In the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, the Habsburgs ceded their rights in Upper Alsace and the Sundgau to the French crown, although the precise extent of the transfer remained disputed for decades. Louis XIV extended French control through his policy of *réunions*, which culminated in the capitulation of Strasbourg to French troops in 1681.¹ The French monarchy left the language of the region largely alone. Alsace was treated as a *province à l'instar de l'étranger effectif* for customs purposes, which meant that a customs line separated it from the interior of France and kept it closely tied to the markets of the Upper Rhine. German remained the language of the churches, the schools and much of the local administration. French spread slowly among the nobility, officials and the urban bourgeoisie.²

The French Revolution changed this approach. Revolutionary governments regarded regional languages as obstacles to the unity of the nation and to the spread of republican ideas. In 1794 the report of the Abbé Grégoire called for the eradication of the *patois*. In practice, the Revolution and the Napoleonic period bound Alsace emotionally to France, even though most Alsatians continued to speak dialect throughout the nineteenth century.³

After the Franco-Prussian War, the Treaty of Frankfurt of 10 May 1871 transferred Alsace and part of Lorraine to the new German Empire, where they formed the *Reichsland Elsass-Lothringen*. German became the official language of administration and education, while the use of French was restricted, although exemptions were granted in French-speaking communes of Lorraine and the Vosges valleys.⁴ Several tens of thousands of Alsatians who wished to remain French opted for French nationality and emigrated, many of them to Paris, Algeria or Switzerland.⁵ The German period lasted almost half a century and produced a generation that was educated entirely in German.

French troops entered Strasbourg in November 1918, after which the Treaty of Versailles confirmed the return of Alsace-Moselle to France. The new French administration introduced French as the language of schooling and government, dismissed or expelled many German-born officials and residents, and sorted the population into categories according to origin. In the interwar years, an autonomist movement opposed the centralising policy of Paris, especially its attempts to introduce the secular laws of the Republic into the region. That conflict lies at the origin of the local law that this chapter examines later.⁶

The years 1940 to 1944 brought the harshest rupture. After the defeat of France, Alsace was annexed de facto by the German Reich and placed under a civil administration led by the Gauleiter of Baden, Robert Wagner. The regime prohibited the use of French and Germanised French first names and surnames. From 1942 young Alsatian men were conscripted into the German armed forces. These conscripts, known as the *malgré-nous*, were sent mostly to the Eastern Front, where many died or were captured.⁷ The liberation in the winter of 1944–1945 returned Alsace to France for the fourth time in less than three centuries.

1 Notes

1. On the cession of Habsburg rights in Alsace in the Treaty of Münster (1648) and the annexation of Strasbourg in 1681, see the standard histories of Alsace, e.g. Vogler (ed.), *Histoire de l'Alsace*. To be verified. ↩
2. On the customs status of Alsace as a "province à l'instar de l'étranger effectif" until 1790 and the limited linguistic intervention of the Ancien Régime, see the literature on Alsatian history in the early modern period. To be verified. ↩
3. On the report of the Abbé Grégoire "sur la nécessité et les moyens d'anéantir les patois et d'universaliser l'usage de la langue française" (1794) and its significance for French language policy, see the standard literature on the history of the French language. To be verified. ↩
4. On the Treaty of Frankfurt of 10 May 1871 and the language policy in the Reichsland Elsass-Lothringen (1871–1918), see the standard histories of Alsace and Lorraine. To be verified. ↩
5. On the option of 1872 and the emigration of Alsatians who chose French nationality, see the literature on the history of Alsace after 1871. Figures to be verified. ↩

6. On the reintegration of Alsace-Moselle into France after 1918, the language policy of the interwar period and the Alsatian autonomist movement, see the standard histories of Alsace. To be verified. ↩
7. On the de facto annexation of Alsace in 1940, the civil administration under Gauleiter Robert Wagner, the ban on French and the forced conscription of the malgré-nous from 1942, see the standard histories of Alsace in the Second World War. Figures to be verified. ↩

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