

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40671-0 - Marc Bloch: A Life in History

Carole Fink

Excerpt

[More information](#)*1. Forebears*

My great-grandfather was a serving soldier in 1793;...my father was one of the defenders of Strasbourg in 1870;...I was brought up in the traditions of patriotism which found no more fervent champions than the Jews of the Alsatian exodus.<sup>1</sup>

Marc Bloch was descended from Jews of eastern France. One of the oldest surviving family documents, a letter by his great-grandfather Gabriel (Getschel) Bloch, was written from the battlefield at Mainz in 1793 (5 Tamouz 5554) in Alsatian Hebrew, using Hebrew characters. The twenty-three-year-old volunteer tersely related the costly defense against the attacking Prussians, assured his father of his faith in God and the protection of his forebears, and expressed his hope for peace and a prompt return to the family home in Wintzenheim in Alsace.<sup>2</sup> Son of the merchant Benjamin Marc (Wolf) Bloch, Gabriel Bloch was the first of his family to enjoy the fruits and pay the price of the emancipation legislation of 1790 and 1791, to which Alsatian Jews – long consigned to poverty and ghetto conditions – responded. As an enlisted man, the peddler Gabriel Bloch was both the scion of an orthodox past and the creator of a new tradition, which enabled his great-grandchild to assert his citizenship a century and a half later.<sup>3</sup>

Gabriel Bloch's son Marc (1816–1880) started another tradition

1 *ED*, pp. 23–24.

2 Original copy in the possession of Etienne Bloch. Useful background in Zosa Szajkowski, "French Jews in the Armed Forces during the Revolution of 1789," in *Jews and the French Revolutions of 1789, 1830, and 1848* (New York: Ktav, 1970), pp. 544–75.

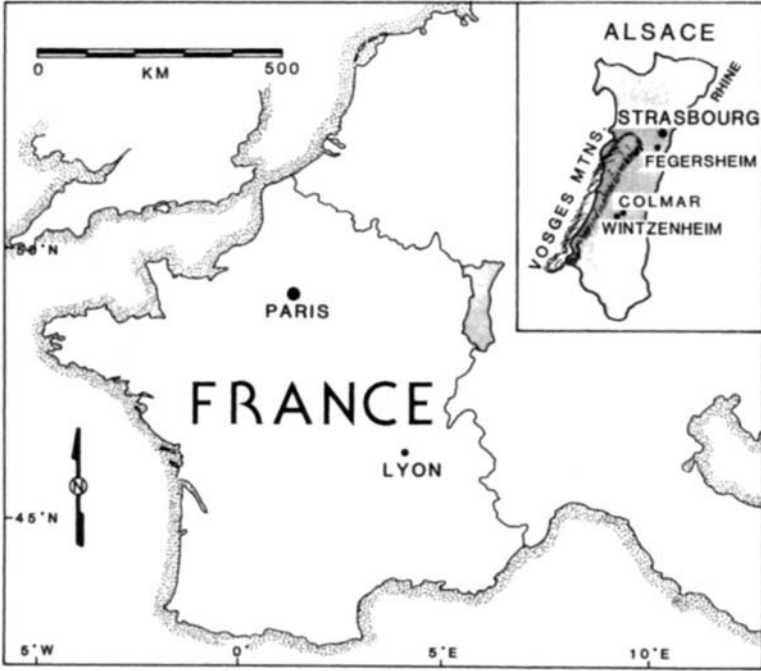
3 *ED*, p. 23. I thank Dr. Henry Bloch-Michel for a copy of the official translation of this letter, dated 13 Oct. 1941, which likely figured in Marc Bloch's efforts to counter Vichy's legislation on racial exclusion, giving proof of five generations of French citizenship and his family's extraordinary services to the nation.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40671-0 - Marc Bloch: A Life in History

Carole Fink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1. Map of France and Alsace

as a teacher. Orphaned at age eleven, he was tutored by an uncle and developed a passion for learning. A disciple of Rousseau, he was the first Jewish student at the Ecole Normale d'Instituteurs of Colmar. After studying for a year at the Ecole Normale in Nancy to perfect his French, he held a modest post for the next twelve years as a schoolmaster (*instituteur*) in the village of Fegersheim outside Strasbourg. There, on 23 August 1847, he married Rose Aron, the daughter of the learned Talmudist Rabbi Alexandre Aron of Fegersheim and grand-daughter of the grand rabbis of Karlsruhe and Metz. On 21 July 1848 a son was born to Marc and Rose Bloch, whom they named Gustave. Two years later the family moved to Strasbourg when, ranking first in a regional competition, Marc Bloch was named director of the newly opened Ecole Israélite de Strasbourg. He now left the village world of Fegersheim for the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40671-0 - Marc Bloch: A Life in History

Carole Fink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Alsatian capital, profiting from its flourishing cultural life under the Second Empire.<sup>4</sup>

Though of relatively modest circumstances, Marc Bloch's family lived comfortably at 6, rue des Francs-Bourgeois, where he taught four courses in Jewish subjects. The school attracted students from the leading Jewish families, and in 1864 its director was named the official Hebrew translator before Strasbourg's civil tribunal. The Blochs had two more sons, Oscar, born in 1861, and Louis, born in 1864. They spent the Jewish holidays and summer vacations in nearby Fegersheim with Rabbi Aron, who made an indelible impression on his grandsons, not only with his learned orthodoxy but also with his fascinating tales and anecdotes and the warmth of his personality. Aron's death in 1874 cut the family's tie with its traditionalist and village roots.<sup>5</sup> Marc Bloch's own world was shattered in 1870, first by a stroke at age fifty-four, then by the siege and bombardment of Strasbourg by the Prussians. Forced to submit to German control of his school and to teach in German, Marc Bloch failed to regain his full capacities. At age sixty-two he was obliged to retire, and after an extended period of decline he died two years later, on 9 November 1880.<sup>6</sup>

Gustave Bloch, who was thirteen years older than one brother and sixteen years older than the other, had been considered a prodigy since his earliest youth. Trained first in his father's school, he studied at the lycée in Strasbourg, where he won all the first prizes and came under the influence of the ancient historian Emile Belot, his colleague later at Lyon. Even more important was the influence of Alexandre Aron. During their walks on the Alsatian plains, he confided in Aron. The diminutive, eloquent rabbi conversed with his gifted grandson and imparted many enduring lessons. Gustave Bloch saved all his grandfather's letters, cherished his memory, and,

4 Information on Marc Bloch's professional career in ADBR, Série T, Fonds du Rectorat. The marriage contract of 1847, documents pertaining to Marc Bloch's education and career, and a detailed family history by his youngest son, Louis (1864–1944), EBC.

5 Alexandre Aron's obituary in *Journal d'Alsace*, 9 Aug. 1874.

6 Condolence letter to Marc Bloch's widow, undated, from the members of the Consistoire Israélite de la Basse-Alsace, EBC.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40671-0 - Marc Bloch: A Life in History

Carole Fink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

when his own end came, asked for a religious funeral out of respect for his pious ancestor.<sup>7</sup>

In 1864, at age sixteen, Gustave Bloch left Alsace for Paris to prepare for the entrance examinations of the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure on the rue d'Ulm. He arrived in the capital an admitted provincial romantic.<sup>8</sup> Living at the Springer Institution, a Jewish residence, where he would be followed seven years later by Henri Bergson, Bloch attended the Lycée Bonaparte, studied philosophy, and placed second in his class.<sup>9</sup>

Four years later, in 1868, he placed first in the *promotion* for the Ecole Normale Supérieure. Founded in 1795 "to educate teachers [to] carry out the ideas of the Enlightenment" and shaped largely under the First Empire, the Ecole Normale continued to produce graduates who formed an elite corps of lycée and university professors under the regime of Napoleon III.<sup>10</sup> According to his later recollections, the bright, exuberant Alsatian was disappointed by the Ecole's intellectually sterile atmosphere and its traditionalist curriculum based primarily on rhetoric and philosophy, which was ill-suited to professional training. He was unsympathetic to Bonapartism, which he blamed for depriving French university life of the fruits of contemporary German scholarship and for perpetuating the stultifying and pedantic academic environment that ultimately weakened the nation.<sup>11</sup>

7 Résumé of Gustave Bloch's life in the obituary written by his student, Jérôme Carcopino ("Gustave Bloch," in Ecole Normale Supérieure, Association Amicale de Secours des Anciens Elèves, *Annuaire* [Paris, 1925], pp. 86–109).

8 AH, pp. 150–51, which Marc Bloch later used to illustrate "lag" (*décalage*) in a particular generation.

9 AN, F17 4201, 9042. Cf. Louis M. Greenberg, "Bergson and Durkheim as Sons and Assimilators: The Early Years," *French Historical Studies* 9, no. 4 (Fall 1976): 622.

10 Robert Smith, *The Ecole Normale Supérieure and the Third Republic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), pp. 5–18.

11 His predecessors Alfred Rambaud (*promotion* of 1864) and Gabriel Monod and Ernest Lavisse (1865) were similarly dissatisfied with the superficiality of their historical instruction at the Ecole Normale: William R. Keylor, *Academy and Community: The Foundation of the French Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 23–24, 36–39; Carcopino, "Gustave Bloch," p. 88.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40671-0 - Marc Bloch: A Life in History

Carole Fink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Nevertheless, entry into one of the *grandes écoles* was a considerable step upward for Gustave Bloch. The Ecole Normale, which prided itself on a democratic tradition and a selection of candidates from all regions, religions, and classes of France, gave him the opportunity to imbibe the political, cultural, and intellectual atmosphere of France's capital. Here he established a fine scholarly record and acquired what a later colleague termed the *culture générale* of those who came of age in the 1870s – a taste for art and literature, concern for social causes, a boundless curiosity, and dedication to the scientific spirit.<sup>12</sup> Here a third-generation emancipated Jew became an assimilated and cosmopolitan Frenchman.<sup>13</sup>

Gustave Bloch arrived in Strasbourg for the summer holidays of 1870 in time to experience the seven-week German siege. He was one of the first to enlist in the civilian militia organized by General Ulrich to extinguish fires and rescue victims. The bombardment of Strasbourg caused heavy casualties and material destruction, including damage to its famous cathedral, before Ulrich finally surrendered on 27 September. The municipal library, with its valuable manuscript collection, had been destroyed. Bloch was unable to continue his studies.

In the preliminaries of peace at Versailles on 26 February 1871, France ceded Alsace and a large part of Lorraine to the new Second Reich. This was formalized in the Treaty of Frankfurt of 10 May 1871, in which article 2 stipulated the terms for those who wished to opt for French nationality. After several unsuccessful efforts to obtain a teaching post in a French lycée, Gustave Bloch decided to return to the Ecole Normale. At this time, more than 159,000 Alsatians (about 15 percent of the total population and 21 percent of the heavily Catholic Haut-Rhin, but only 10 percent of Bloch's native département of Bas-Rhin) left for the interior, where they would contribute significantly to the political, economic, and cultural life of the Third Republic. The exodus also deprived the pro-

12 Gustave Lanson, "Discours," 5 Dec. 1923. EBC. Gustave Bloch's scholastic records in AN, 61 AJ 182, 183.

13 Wladimir Rabi, *Anatomie du judaïsme français* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1962), pp. 65–66.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40671-0 - Marc Bloch: A Life in History

Carole Fink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

vince of their skills and independence during a critical period of almost five decades of German rule.<sup>14</sup>

Back in Paris, Bloch found changes in the Ecole Normale; the defeat by Prussia reinforced the pressure by French academics for reforms and led eventually to government support for major personnel and curricular changes.<sup>15</sup> Gustave Bloch appears to have fallen under the influence of Fustel de Coulanges, whose lectures on ancient France introduced a new vibrance and scholarly rigor into the rue d'Ulm. In 1872 he passed the *agrégation* with a first in letters.<sup>16</sup>

Gustave Bloch left Paris at age twenty-four for his first teaching post as a classics professor at the lycée of Besançon with an awakened enthusiasm for history.<sup>17</sup> A year later he won an appointment to study archaeology at the Ecole Française d'Athènes, but was assigned to the branch institute in Rome, which was headed by the *normalien* Albert Dumont. Originally a joint venture with Prussia, the Institut Archéologique de Rome had its German support cut off in 1871 at the behest of the Second Reich. Dumont argued against maintaining the Rome institute as a practicum for the older better-endowed Athens school. He urged the establishment of an independent French institution in Rome to provide first-class archaeological training and "exceed the work of the Germans," who with their facilities, research, major chairs, and journals dominated the field. Gustave Bloch was therefore present during the founding years of the new Ecole Française de Rome, which began in 1873 with five hearty students.<sup>18</sup>

14 Letters to Ministère de l'Instruction Publique, 29 May, 8 June, 6 Sept. 1871, AN, F17 22468; Gustave Bloch, Option pour la nationalité française, 28 June 1872, AN, BB 31 47. Also Alfred Wahl, *L'option et l'émigration des Alsaciens-Lorrains (1871–1872)* (Paris: Ophrys, 1972), and François-Georges Dreyfus, *Histoire de l'Alsace* (Paris: Hachette, 1979), pp. 248–55.

15 Claude Digeon, *La crise allemande de la pensée française (1870–1914)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959), chaps. 5–7.

16 See report by M. Jaquinet on the *agrégation*, AN, F17 22468. More accomplished in the written than the oral presentation, Bloch was described as an "esprit réfléchi, sagace et ferme, dont la distinction se cache d'abord sous des façons et une tenue assez rudes et incultes."

17 AN, F17 22468; Carcopino, "Gustave Bloch," pp. 88–89.

18 *Le Temps*, 19 July 1874; records in AN, F17 4129/4130.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40671-0 - Marc Bloch: A Life in History

Carole Fink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Under Dumont's direction, the Ecole Française de Rome flourished. Officially chartered in 1875, the school moved from the charming Villa Médicis, which it had shared with the French art academy, to the sumptuous Villa Mérode. There was a warm spirit of camaraderie between the students and the youthful Dumont, who taught courses in archaeology and prudently managed the school's external relations. He pleaded with Paris for more ample resources and compensated for his sparse library holdings by arranging loans from the Germans. Historical research at the Ecole was modeled on the critical tradition of Barthold Georg Niebuhr and Theodor Mommsen.

Gustave Bloch, who studied Roman administrative history and specialized in epigraphy, received excellent reports. He had two stays in Athens, in the fall of 1874 and the spring of 1876; but he preferred Rome where, still under the influence of Fustel de Coulanges, he sought to investigate the civilization that had left so important an imprint on France. For three years, between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-eight, Bloch patiently examined texts as well as the sites and monuments of antiquity and developed his intuition and his concrete sense of the past, which would supplement his philological and historical research. Bloch's Roman years, rich and happy, were highlighted by his friendships with Dumont and with French artists, sculptors, archaeologists, and diplomats.<sup>19</sup>

Gustave Bloch returned to France in 1876. On Dumont's recommendation he was appointed to the Faculty of Letters of the University of Lyon to teach a new course in Greek and Latin antiquities. His inaugural lecture announced his adherence to a new doctrine of classical history. According to Bloch, the "reconstitution of the reality of the past (*la réalité disparue*)" should explore all types of testimony; it demanded an energetic examination of texts and monuments and a persistent comparison of both. This diligent labor required diverse and rare qualities: "an exact and complete knowledge of the facts, the first condition of all certitude; a largeness of vision which, in addition to facts, seeks reasons; a sensibility able to

19 AN, F17 13600; Dumont to Ministère de l'Instruction Publique, AN, F17 22468; Carcopino, "Gustave Bloch," pp. 90–92.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40671-0 - Marc Bloch: A Life in History

Carole Fink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

distinguish styles and epochs; an imagination which reproduces the sentiments of another age; and the finesse to grasp the most subtle nuances." Gustave Bloch represented a determined and "reflective eclecticism," which he practiced and passed on to his students.<sup>20</sup>

The new returnee from Rome doubtless raised some hackles among the senior faculty of Lyon with his ambition and novel ideas. Protected by his former lycée professor, Belot, and supported by his *normalien* and Roman colleagues Charles Bayet and Léon Clédat, Bloch found his place at Lyon as a historian. He was a popular, well-respected lecturer, received the highest ratings for his teaching, and in 1882 was recommended to direct a new course at Lyon in archaeology and epigraphy. The specialist in ancient Rome was capable of both filling the amphitheater and providing expert historical training.<sup>21</sup>

On 26 March 1878 Gustave Bloch married Sarah Ebstein two months short of her twentieth birthday. Ebstein had been born in Lyon to an Alsatian family. Within a year of the marriage, their first son, Louis Constant Alexandre, was born. Seven years later, when Gustave Bloch was thirty-eight, there was a second son, whom they named Marc Léopold Benjamin. Upon his father's death in 1880, Bloch had brought his mother to Lyon, and she remained with him until her death fifteen years later.<sup>22</sup>

During this time Gustave Bloch's career accelerated. In 1884, at the Sorbonne, he successfully defended his doctoral thesis on the origins of the Roman Senate. The official report was commendatory. It recognized the self-made historian, *agrégé* in letters at the Ecole Normale, who had been teaching at a university for several years without a doctorate, and pronounced him the strongest, most mature candidate in a long time. The judges wrote, "This small, stout, swarthy, and bearded man... has a remarkably sure and vigorous

20 Carcopino, "Gustave Bloch," pp. 92–93.

21 AN, F17 22468; notes by Sarah Bloch, undated, EBC.

22 Gustave Bloch also brought his two brothers, who formally opted for French citizenship, to Lyon, where they began business careers. *ED*, p. 23.

On the occasion of her return to France, Rose Bloch carried hidden in her baggage the aged national flag which had flown over her husband's school during the siege of Strasbourg and which Gustave and Sarah Bloch subsequently displayed on all national holidays. Louis Bloch, *Family history*, EBC.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40671-0 - Marc Bloch: A Life in History

Carole Fink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

spirit, enhanced by firm and correct speech.”<sup>23</sup> For ten years Gustave Bloch had investigated the obscure period of Rome’s first centuries, concentrating on the patrician Senate as a key and enduring institution. Well informed by his Roman experiences and combining Fustel’s view that history was a series of questions, not all of which could ever be resolved, with what he understood of the Germans’ discipline and erudition, Gustave Bloch was eclectic and comparative in his presentation. He delighted in puncturing errors bequeathed by ancient sources, and reflected what would be his abiding interest in the people.<sup>24</sup>

Paris now beckoned. Failing in his candidacy for the Collège de France, Gustave Bloch was nominated for the professorship of ancient history at his alma mater, the Ecole Normale Supérieure, and began officially on 1 January 1888. Eleven years later, he was named an officer of the Legion of Honor on the basis of his services at the Ecole Normale. In 1904, when the Ministry of Education reunited the Ecole with the University of Paris and abolished its separate teaching faculty, Bloch was given a chair in ancient history at the Sorbonne, where he remained until his retirement in 1919.<sup>25</sup>

Nicknamed *le Méga*, Gustave Bloch was a formidable figure at the rue d’Ulm.<sup>26</sup> He appears to have inherited Fustel’s role among the *normaliens* as a scrupulous scholar and demanding teacher, exuberant

23 Report on the thesis defense, 23 Feb. 1884. AN, F17 22468. There is an interesting parallel with Alphonse Aulard, who left the Ecole Normale in 1871 as a specialist in modern literature, later trained himself with great passion and patriotism in the political study of the French Revolution, and became mentor to dozens of eminent historians. Keylor, *Academy*, pp. 68–70.

24 Gustave Bloch, *Les origines du Sénat romain* (Paris: E. Thorin, 1883); review by Willems in *RH* 2 (1885): 164–75.

25 Carcopino, “Gustave Bloch,” p. 97; AN, F17 22468.

26 Raoul Blanchard, *Ma jeunesse sous l’aile de Péguy* (Paris: Fayard, 1961), pp. 224–25; Paul Dimoff, *La rue d’Ulm à la Belle Epoque, 1899–1903: Mémoires d’un normalien supérieur* (Nancy: G. Thomas, 1970), pp. 33–34; Edouard Herriot, *Jadis: Avant la première guerre mondiale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1948), pp. 70–71; Hubert Bourgin, *De Jaurès à Léon Blum: L’Ecole Normale et la politique* (Paris: Fayard, 1938), pp. 30–31; Lucien Febvre, “Marc Bloch et Strasbourg: Souvenirs d’une grande histoire,” in *Mémorial des années 1939–1945*, Publication de la Faculté des Lettres de l’Université de Strasbourg (Paris, 1947), pp. 171–72; and esp. Carcopino, “Gustave Bloch,” pp. 97–100.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40671-0 - Marc Bloch: A Life in History

Carole Fink

Excerpt

[More information](#)

but unsentimental, with a powerful, picturesque vocabulary. Small, portly, bearded, and bald, he compensated for a lack of physical grace with his “imperturbable probity.” Straightforward, undogmatic, precise, and frank, his lectures gave students the opportunity to witness the process of his thought; several listeners responded by choosing ancient history as their vocation. His legendary brutality with careless student presentations was balanced by his warmth and affection for his protégés. He shared his experiences and the fruits of his research with them and exhibited exceptional fairness, kindness, and concern over their lives and careers.

Active as a scholar, Bloch produced several articles, reviews, and short monographs, maintaining his old interest in the plebians of ancient Rome.<sup>27</sup> In 1900 he contributed a volume to Lavissee’s series on the history of France. Inspired by Fustel and nourished by his investigations in Lyon, his book, *La Gaule indépendante et la Gaule romaine* was an ambitious popular study from the Stone Age to the fifth century. As a patriot, Bloch aspired to supplant the Germans’ dominance of this field; but this foray into unfamiliar terrain involved a risk for a nonspecialist who instinctively emphasized Roman influences over the traditions of ancient Gaul. Most foreign reviews were favorable, but French experts pointed out their colleague’s deficiencies. His last two works, *La république romaine* (1913) and *L’empire romain* (1921), brief general studies of the formation and decline of Rome’s political and social system, were well received.<sup>28</sup>

Gustave Bloch was one of the group of assimilated Jewish savants who, encouraged by the liberal, reformist atmosphere and institutions of the Third Republic, entered disciplines once alien to their people. His lifelong friends from the Pension Derembourg, Arsène and James Darmesteter (born in 1846 and 1849), descendants of generations of biblical scholars, became authorities in medieval French and Oriental philology; Bloch’s future colleague Emile Durkheim (born in 1853), son of an Alsatian rabbi, became France’s leading sociologist; Henri Bergson (born in 1859), son of a Polish

27 Gustave Bloch, “La plèbe romaine: Essai sur quelques théories récentes,” *RH* 106 (1911): 70–77.

28 Review by Salomon Reinach in *Revue Archéologique* 19 (1924): 389; Carcopino, “Gustave Bloch,” pp. 101–3.