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978-0-521-66631-2 - France and the Great War, 1914–1918

Leonard V. Smith, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker

Excerpt

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Introduction

On November 6, 1915, Sarah Bernhardt performed a dramatic poem by Eugène Morand, *Les Cathédrales*, at the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt in Paris. Even the “Divine Sarah,” then seventy-one years old and still the greatest actress of the French stage after a career spanning more than fifty years, had seldom taken to the stage under more remarkable circumstances. It was her first performance in Paris after her return from the Bordeaux region, where she had fled as the Germans approached Paris in August 1914. Bernhardt herself was no stranger to war. She had opened a hospital for the wounded at the Odéon theatre in Paris during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–1. According to legend, she left Paris in 1914 only after her friend and future wartime premier Georges Clemenceau told her she was on a list of hostages to be taken by the Germans if they captured the city. Moreover, the aging star was herself recuperating from major surgery – the amputation of her leg, which had finally become gangrenous after years of mistreatment of an old injury.

In itself, *Les Cathédrales* is a work remote in form and content from today’s aesthetic sensibilities. It recounted the dream of a young and courageous French soldier who has grabbed a few moments of sleep near the front, in the department of the Nord, invaded by the Germans. Though his unit had been retreating, he could not take his eyes off his devastated native village, or the ruins of his own house, and he fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion. During his dream, a number of the great cathedrals of France appeared to him as allegorical figures. They praised the courage of all young soldiers, on whom they know the salvation of the country depends. They recounted the suffering of France since August 1914. Notre Dame de Paris lamented:

The German eagle cast its immense shadow upon us
From the first days, he reviled me.
At the hour of prayer,
My people were assembled at the foot of my towers,

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The thunder that he held in his claws,
He made it fall on me, on me, Paris.¹

In about the middle of the piece, Bernhardt appeared as the Alsatian cathedral of Strasbourg, which had been under German control since 1871. Seated on an ornate dais, she recounted the sorrow of her long separation from the rest of France. She lamented the trials of the cathedral in Rheims in the Champagne, bombarded by the Germans in 1914: “Queen of cathedrals,/ Seeking Heaven through the poked-out eyes of her windows,/ Is like a martyr in the hands of her torturers.”

Yet she foretold allegorically that Strasbourg, still the hostage of the invader, would one day seal the doom of Germany. Her own spire would ascend heavenward and skewer the eagle symbolizing the ancient enemy. The eagle would die a grisly death. Plainly, her prediction was only symbolic up to a point. Real, flesh and blood Germans should expect no gentler treatment. During this protracted speech, Bernhardt managed as if miraculously to bring herself to a standing position on her one remaining leg, as her unforgettable voice rang forth:

... Now part, my spire! And whistle! And rise!
Pierce the sky with your lightning!
Great arrow of iron!
Arrow of God that nothing can chip,
Strike him in the heart, pitiless arrow,
Part, my arrow of five hundred feet!
Ah! Ah, you have struck him, my arrow! He falls,
The assassin of cities, he who slits the throats of doves!
How long it takes him to fall. He falls! He falls!
Finally!
Drained of all his blood, deprived of his feathers,
Cast against the rocks, in the eddies of foam,
The eagle, the German eagle, has fallen into the Rhine!
Pleure, Pleure, Allemagne,
L'Aigle, l'aigle Allemand est tombé dans le Rhin!
(Weep, Weep, Germany,
The Eagle, the German eagle, has fallen into the Rhine!)

Little seemed to justify faith in such an outcome in November 1915. An Anglo-French offensive in the Artois and the Champagne had come and gone that autumn, with no meaningful gains and heavy casualties. The allies of France fared no better. The Russians had been driven from the Habsburg province of Galicia, while the British, Australians, and the French were being massacred in the fruitless offensive against the

¹ Eugène Morand, *Les Cathédrales* (Paris: Librairie Théâtrale, Artistique & Littéraire, probably 1916). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are our own.

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Ottoman Turks in the Dardanelles. People in the United States, while enraged over the German sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915, remained overwhelmingly isolationist. For France, ahead lay the carnage of Verdun, the Somme, and the Chemin des Dames, and the near collapse in 1918.

Sarah Bernhardt was not the consummate performer of her age for nothing. Clearly, she sought, in these unpromising circumstances, to symbolize embattled France itself – aged, mutilated, but almost miraculously still in the fight. She and the nation had plenty of battle scars, inflicted from within as well as from without. But both maintained a remarkable resilience still little understood outside France. Her performance spoke to a uniquely French war culture in the conflict of 1914–18 that lies at the heart of this book. By “war culture,” we mean the many varieties of representation through which the French understood the war and their commitment to winning it. Bernhardt’s particular performance of this war culture had its roots in nineteenth-century sentimentality, and can seem melodramatic and even silly to many people today. Yet even across the considerable expanse of time, we cannot deny the sincerity of *Les Cathédrales*, indeed its deadly seriousness. The national community that adored Sarah Bernhardt knew, at a certain level, what it wanted out of the war and accepted the perils, the sacrifices, the hatreds, and the cruelties of fighting it.

Barely a year and a half later, on May 18, 1917, and directly across the square from the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt at the Théâtre du Châtelet, premiered the Ballet Russe production of *Parade*. The proceeds of the performance were to go to a fund to help wounded soldiers and their families. The collaborators in *Parade* comprised a “who’s who” of the artistic avant-garde of Paris. Impresario Serge Diaghilev staged the ballet, at the same theatre where his production of Igor Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps* (The Rite of Spring) had caused a riot in 1913. Jean Cocteau wrote a one-page script, Erik Satie wrote the music, Léonide Massine did the choreography, and Pablo Picasso designed the sets and costumes. Guillaume Apollinaire wrote the program notes.

By May 1917, the fortunes of France in the conflict had never been lower. The Chemin des Dames offensive had failed, and a major mutiny was brewing within the French army. The tsarist regime had fallen in Russia, and that country’s future participation in the war had become uncertain. To be sure, the United States had entered the war on the side of the Allies in April 1917. But militarily speaking, the American colossus was still a world away. It had plenty of money, but no army to speak of and no infrastructure for war production. The French could not expect serious material assistance from the United States any time soon.

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The meanings of *Parade* are as diffuse as the message of *Les Cathédrales* is focused – and that, perhaps, is the point. Ostensibly, it is a work fixated on curiosities, on what in the grim spring of 1917 must have seemed like tasteless trivialities – a Chinese magician, acrobats, and the antics of an American girl. The work seemed directed toward anything *but* the war that at that very moment was tearing apart the France that so easily understood Sarah Bernhardt. Satie's music freely adopted both French and American popular music, and was full of kitschy and catchy tunes. As if this were not enough, he drew on sounds quite removed from the concert hall – sirens, whistles, a revolver, and even a typewriter. The French term “*parade*” means a sideshow, set up alongside a traveling theatre to draw in customers. As such, the *parade* in the ballet failed miserably. The audience in the piece became so fixated on the sideshow that no one ever bothered to go inside to the “actual” performances, despite the increasingly frantic efforts of three managers attired in Picasso's cubist costumes. They finally collapsed on each other as the magician, the acrobats, and the American girl tried to convince them and the audience, in Cocteau's words, “*que le spectacle se donne à l'intérieur* [that the spectacle takes place inside].”

Certainly, at least part of the audience was displeased, though the stories of the premier of *Parade* got better with the telling. Cocteau proclaimed, rather grandly, that “I have heard the cries of a bayonet charge in Flanders [probably not true, in fact], but it was nothing compared to what happened that night at the Châtelet Theatre.”² Several critics were hostile. Satie in particular was accused of *bochisme*³ (“Hunism” or “Krautism”), of writing music so disrespectful and inappropriate that it undermined the war effort and gave aid and comfort to the enemy. In a career-defining episode, Satie sent a series of obscene postcards to one critic, calling him “not only an asshole (*con*) but an unmusical asshole.” The critic sued for libel, nearly bankrupting Satie but solidifying his position as the premier avant-garde French composer of the day.

On the surface, *Parade* seems like a very familiar avant-garde embrace of the radically new, of trying to shock an audience for its own sake. Wild costumes, irreverent music, and distinctly non-classical choreography pointed to a violent rupture with the sentimental and patriotic aesthetic of Sarah Bernhardt. But *Parade* was as much a cultural production

² Cocteau had served for a time as a nurse near but not actually in the front lines. Jean Cocteau, “Parade: Ballet Réaliste In Which Four Modernist Artists Had a Hand,” *Vanity Fair*, September 1917, quoted in Frank W. D. Ries, *The Dance Theater of Jean Cocteau* (Ann Arbor, MI.: UMI Research Press, 1986), p. 188.

³ *Boche* became the preferred racial epithet that the French applied to the Germans in World War I, the reference being to having a wooden head.

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of the Great War in France as *Les Cathédrales*. The war haunted *Parade* far more than its frivolous exterior suggested. For who in France in 1917 could imagine that the real *spectacle*, wherever it “actually” took place, was anything but the war itself? Cocteau, after all, insisted on a subtitle of “*ballet réaliste*.” The humor of the work aside, it raised abstract but troubling questions about what was internal and what external to the spectacle. Apollinaire, wounded in the head at the front in 1916 and later a casualty of the influenza epidemic at the end of the war in 1918, carried the “realism” of *Parade* one step further. In his program notes, he contended that the marriage of music, dance, painting, and costumes had created something more than real, something “*sur-réal*.” Although Apollinaire did not mean the same thing by this term as later surrealists, he too believed that the new France that created the spectacle and was being created by it required new representational modes. *Parade*, he wrote, hailed a new artistic era. The ballet was “so pure and so simple that one recognizes within it the marvelously lucid spirit of France herself.”⁴ The charge of *bochisme* against Satie, in fact, was quite misplaced. The very outlandishness of his music was a nationalist reaction to what Satie considered the overblown and ponderous Germanic symphonic tradition. *Parade* was an idiosyncratic but fiercely patriotic work, in its way as much so as *Les Cathédrales*.

We propose in this book to tell the story of the national community and the war culture that produced two such apparently divergent artistic works, which actually said many of the same things. We examine the national community that embarked upon, sustained, and in some way prevailed in the conflict of 1914–18. We explore how the national agony of the war inaugurated what Jean-Jacques Becker called “the great mutation”⁵ of France, and consider how the war shaped the history of that country in the rest of the twentieth century and beyond. One could reasonably question the rationale for writing this sort of national history, at the beginning of a century when the meanings of nationhood are in flux across the world, nowhere more so than in Europe. There is indeed a paradox underpinning this volume, in that the authors firmly believe that the future of the study of World War I and of European history in general lies in international and comparative scholarship.

The national community matters first and foremost here because it mattered first and foremost to people at the time. World War I proved, at least to date, the last general conflict among European nation-states.

⁴ Guillaume Apollinaire, “Parade,” in Pierre Caizergues and Michel Décaudin, eds., *Apollinaire: Oeuvres en prose complètes*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), vol. 2: p. 865.

⁵ Jean-Jacques Becker, *La France en guerre, 1914–1918: la grande mutation* (Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1988).

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The nation-state remained the basic military, political, economic, social, and cultural unit for the duration, even though universal ideologies became more engaged as the war became “total.” Certainly, European states dragged their empires into the war, and it ended to no small degree thanks to intervention from outside Europe, from the United States. But unlike World War II, World War I was primarily a European conflict that came to absorb other parts of the world. The “European” focus of the war mattered particularly to the French in reflecting on the twentieth century, given that the defeat by Germany in 1940 suddenly and dramatically removed most of France and most of the French from most of World War II. Consequently, the traditional French term *la Grande Guerre* (the Great War), probably more accurately describe the conflict of 1914–18 than “World War I.”⁶ Ultimately, we invoke the nation as the central category here, whatever its instabilities, because we believe the comparative study of World War I must rest on a thorough knowledge of just what is being compared. In this sense, we see this book as a companion to the volume by Roger Chickering in this series, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914–1918* (1998).

In the Great War, the Western Front played the role played by the Eastern Front in World War II – the theatre where the outcome of the war was decided. And France was the country where virtually all of the Western Front was located. As we will show, the position of the Western Front and the character of the fighting that took place there made the Great War a life-or-death struggle for France. France, to be sure, had lost most of two large and prosperous provinces, Alsace and Lorraine, in its defeat by Prussia in 1871. But Bernhardt’s protestations aside, the “lost territories” were borderlands, where people spoke German and Alsatian dialects at least as much as they spoke French. Few in France would admit it after 1914, but France had managed to remain France without them. Not so for the large swath of northeastern France conquered by the Germans in August 1914. Much of French coal and steel production came into German hands. And as a matter of principle, the French could not let stand another massive appropriation of national territory by Germany. To remain “France,” the national community had to reconquer not just northeastern France, but the older “lost territories” as well – even if the experience of “total war” would in time invoke the destruction of the national community that embarked on it. On this basis,

⁶ World War II, we would argue, began as two distinct continental wars in Europe and Asia. But by the end of 1941, following the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and the German declaration of war on the United States, these wars became a single and genuinely global conflict of massive geopolitical, military, and ideological blocs.

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the French came to justify practically an open-ended commitment to the war, and to a vindictive and unworkable peace once it concluded.

We will tell the story of the “great mutation” of France in the Great War through a double narrative structure. Our book unfolds both chronologically and thematically. At different phases of the war, different varieties of history take center stage. Chapter 1 begins with politics, diplomacy, and the military. We explore how the legacy of war in the nineteenth century had shaped France at the beginning of the twentieth century, then the outbreak of war in 1914. We focus on the origins and contours of the grim resolution that sustained the French throughout the conflict. The military stalemate that resulted from the battles of 1914, coupled with the loss of northeastern France to the Germans, made a compromise peace impossible. Chapter 2 explores the implications of this impasse, and emphasizes social, cultural, and economic history. Recovering the occupied territories both required and justified the “total” mobilization of the French national community. We argue that the very success of French national mobilization at least makes comprehensible a military strategy that otherwise seems not just cruel, but insane. For the irresistible force of national commitment ran into the immovable object of the war of the trenches. The massive grief that afflicted France after 1918 began during the war itself. Chapter 3 begins with military strategy, and the soldiers’ war culture that resulted from it. The pre-war doctrine of the offensive persisted in the grim setting of the stalemated war. Bit by bit, French military strategy came apart in ways that made the survival of France *qua* France a more dire matter than ever. Of course, the war exacted the greatest price from the soldiers who fought it. Yet we argue that soldiers were not just victims of their experience in the trenches, but were active participants in negotiating it in their own war culture, distinct from but closely connected to that of the civilians.

France, like the other European protagonists in World War I, experienced a period of national crisis, when its continued participation in the war could by no means be taken for granted. *Parade* premiered during a phase of national vertigo lasting most of 1917, in which France could neither win the war nor relinquish it. Chapter 4 emphasizes social and political history, and examines the multiple crises of 1917 – mutiny at the front, strikes in the interior, and bitter divisions in the government resolved by a quasi-dictatorship under the government of Georges Clemenceau. Yet in the end, the national community proved remarkably adaptable, and a “second mobilization” (alongside critical support from the Allies) made it possible for France to emerge from the war as something of a victor. Chapter 5 examines how France tried but only partly succeeded in ending the war. We show how an incomplete military victory led to a bitter peace

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that ultimately failed to resolve the conflict. Commemoration sought to console individuals in deep mourning, and to construct a narrative of national triumph not actually there in the Versailles treaty of 1919. In our conclusion, we explore how a grieving France came to reject the Great War, and then to forget and repress much of its experience in the Great War after World War II, only to return to it, and to traces of its abiding grief, at the end of the twentieth century.

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1 The national community goes to war

In *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (1856), Alexis de Tocqueville described the French as a people “talented enough at anything, but who excel only at war. They adore chance, force, success, flash and noise, more than true glory. More capable of heroism than virtue, of genius more than good sense, they are suited more to conceiving immense plans than to completing great enterprises.” Up to a point, Tocqueville knew his compatriots well. Over the course of the nineteenth century, France had gone to war many times and, in general, had fared poorly at it. The French had mainly themselves to blame. The century began in a blaze of Napoleonic glory, followed by complete national defeat in 1815. Not that this prevented the French from erecting to Napoleon their greatest military monument, the Arc du Triomphe, an unusual tribute to a defeated commander. Some victories came at mid-century, against the Russians in the Crimean War of 1853–6, and against the Habsburg Monarchy in Italy in 1859. Yet these were classic nineteenth-century “limited” wars, in which France ventured and gained relatively little. But the “immense plan” of Emperor Napoleon III (allegedly the illegitimate nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte) to install his protégé, Archduke Maximilian (the brother of Habsburg Emperor Francis Joseph), as emperor of Mexico in 1861 ended in utter failure. France had nothing to show for it but the famous 1867 painting by Édouard Manet of Maximilian’s execution by Mexican patriots.

Worst of all, France provoked a war with Prussia in 1870, over what seemed the relatively minor matter of the succession to the Spanish throne. In fact, Napoleon III wanted to forestall the unification of Germany under Prussian leadership. He had reason for concern, but blundered without allies into a war that invoked the very thing he sought to prevent. The overconfident French army met defeat within two months, and on January 18, 1871, the victors proclaimed the creation of the German Empire. To maximize the humiliation of their foe, the Prussians chose to do so in France, in one of the most splendid spaces created by the old monarchy – the Hall of Mirrors at the palace at Versailles. According

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to the armistice with the new republican government of France signed a few days later, France had to pay a large indemnity and surrender Alsace-Moselle and most of Lorraine, two wealthy provinces now absorbed into the Reich. France could fume and swear one day to get its revenge, but not much else. Worse, a new Great Power had been created at its doorstep, far more dangerous to France than Prussia had ever been. The Third French Republic had to prepare for a new war with Germany virtually from the day of its inception. France would never again feel safe from Germany until the Allies divided Hitler's Third Reich after World War II.

Yet Tocqueville, who died in 1856, did not live long enough to see the whole picture. Perhaps he was too taken with his idealized version of the young republic in the United States to see his own country clearly anyway. The French economy boomed through most of the nineteenth century, and French literary and artistic life remained the envy of the West. By the end of a century of war, revolution, and social turmoil, the French, in part through a massive investment in institutions such as the education system and the army, had forged one of the most cohesive national communities in the world. France had also become the only republic among the Great Powers of Europe. The Third Republic proved more cautious about going to war than the regime of Napoleon III. The guardians of the republic made alliances, in order to contain a Germany much larger, wealthier, and militarily stronger than itself. Those among the French who sought Napoleon's sort of military glory did so mainly through the vast French global empire. The French military, as we will see, had many problems, in doctrine, funding, and leadership. But the army and navy of France continued to be feared throughout Europe and even the world. Moreover, despite decades of civil-military turmoil, democracy took hold in the French military. Unique among Europeans mobilized in 1914, the French soldier served neither kaiser nor tsar nor king, only himself and his compatriots. Even before the outbreak of the war, he was a citizen-soldier.

But success in the great enterprise of national rehabilitation came at a price. The alliances made by the Republic, in the end, provoked rather than deterred Germany and its ally Austria-Hungary, and thus helped render the diplomatic situation in Europe more perilous. In the crisis of August 1914, France had little room for maneuver, because of diplomatic and military choices made decades earlier. But this did not obscure the fact that Germany and not France chose war in 1914, because of the inflexibility of prewar German military planning. France had war forced upon it more than any other European country except Belgium and perhaps Serbia. German aggression in August 1914 responded to a