

Revolutionary France's War of Conquest in the Rhineland

In May 1790, the French National Assembly renounced wars of conquest. Two years later, France declared war on Austria and invaded Belgium and the Rhineland, claiming it was to spread the benefits of the Revolution. Soon, however, military and economic crises drove a shift in the nature of France's war effort. What started as a war for liberty became a war for conquest, one that brought devastating exploitation to the Rhineland. It was during this time that French foreign policy became influenced by the idea of attaining the natural frontiers – the Alps, the Pyrenees, and, most significantly, the Rhine. Although the natural frontiers policy is often portrayed as a diplomatic tradition of the French monarchy, Jordan R. Hayworth shows that it was born during the Revolution. In addition, Hayworth examines the intense and consequential debates that arose over the policy, which caused much confusion in the war and helped to undermine France's democratic experiment.

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Conquering the Natural Frontier, 1792–1797

Jordan R. Hayworth

US Air Command and Staff College, Alabama



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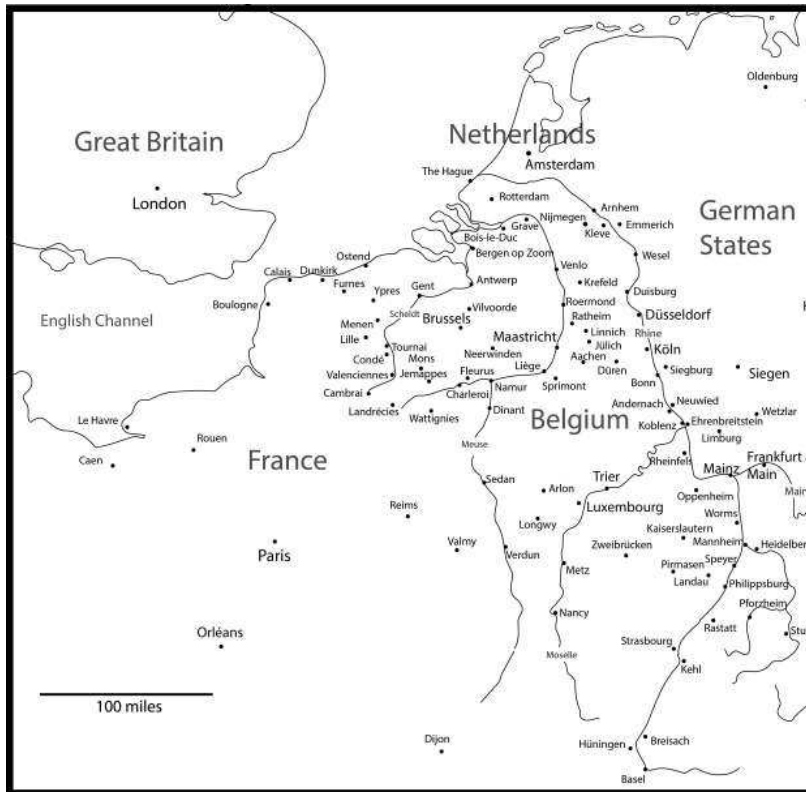
For Brittany

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Map 1 Key Places and Regions

Preface

A small commune in northern France approximately five miles south of the Belgian border, Wattignies was usually a quiet place, surrounded by verdant farmland and forests with the occasional hill. Between 15 and 16 October 1793, however, the peaceful calm was broken by a ferocious battle that took the lives of perhaps as many as 8,000 French and Allied soldiers. In a different manner, the quiet was disturbed yet again on 27 October 1895, when a formal ceremony was held to celebrate the town's adoption of the name "Wattignies-la-Victoire," commemorating the battle that occurred there during the French Revolutionary Wars. Townspeople gathered around the small square while representatives of the French Third Republic unveiled a "simple and modest, but nonetheless beautiful monument" to memorialize the victory. The former senator from the Nord *département*, Maxime Lecomte, spoke of the historical significance of "the memorable *jours*" of October 1793, which he claimed evoked "the highest and most patriotic of sentiments." In part, Lecomte's speech aimed to connect the historical experience of the Revolution with the Third Republic, an example of the widespread process of presenting France's past as a cohesive, unified national narrative. On the plates of the stone obelisk appear the names of Revolutionary heroes such as Lazare Carnot, General Jean-Baptiste Jourdan, and Representative on Mission Florent Joseph Duquesnoy, who, according to Lecomte, invoked in "the memory of our people ... the heroic courage of the Volunteers, by which France was saved."¹

Yet the symbolism on the Wattignies monument evoked French national sentiments beyond republicanism and military heroism. Perched atop the monument, a rooster – the national symbol of France – defiantly stands before the Belgian frontier. While the iconography suggests that the Battle of Wattignies served the national defense of France, the rooster evokes a crucial double meaning because it derives its symbolism from the Latin translation *gallus*, which possesses an obvious linguistic association with

¹ Lecomte, *Paroles*, 179–180.

Gaul.² According to Lecomte: “The name of Wattignies-la-Victoire, on our extreme frontier, resonates like a fanfare. It stirs in our souls the sacred memories of a grandiose past, memories symbolized also by the Gallic cock, in its energy and its strength, spreading its wings and sending into the air its clear and victorious song.”³ The rooster atop the Wattignies monument, therefore, symbolizes not just the actual France, but an *imagined* France that reaches back a millennium to ancient Gaul. Dozens of other sculpted roosters like the one at Wattignies-la-Victoire dot that region of France, prominently positioned in places like Sedan, Rheims, and Metz; in their symbolic meaning, they certainly stand ready to defend *la patrie*, but they also unmistakably call attention to the idea of a Greater France that possesses the natural frontiers of ancient Gaul: the Atlantic and Mediterranean Oceans, the Alps and Pyrenees Mountains, and, most importantly, the Rhine River.

One reason for the Gallic cock’s symbolic power as a cultural touchstone is that it embodies the idea of a unified French past. The pursuit of natural frontiers is mainly associated with the French Revolution. Yet many historians – perhaps most prominently nineteenth-century French scholar Albert Sorel – have seen it, or the territorial reconstitution of ancient Gaul, as a constant driving force, not just in modern French history, but for a duration of time well before the French Revolution. A constant push toward boundaries rooted around romantic and ideological notions of French historical identity has been said to have dramatically influenced French strategic culture, an interpretation that has fostered a long-standing historiographical controversy that persists to the present. At stake is the extent to which mythical conceptions of national history and ideology, rather than pragmatism and self-interest, influenced the foreign policy of ancien régime and Revolutionary France. As of yet, the natural frontiers controversy has been centered on political, intellectual, and diplomatic discourse and, unsurprisingly, concentrates heavily on the ancien régime period. In taking a fresh look at this issue, I offer a new perspective by highlighting the significance of the undervalued *military* dimension involved in extending French territory to the Rhine River during the French Revolution. Only by examining the actual war fought

² Beaune in *Birth of an Ideology*, 318, explains that “the medieval source of the *coq gaulois* came very late to the scene, even though the pun on *gallus*, Latin for both ‘Gaul’ and ‘cock,’ was widely known. Medieval bestiaries tell us why it took so long for this bird to become the emblem of France, for they associate the cock with the sin of lust – a most unedifying representation for the Most Christian nation. That sinful association began to disappear in the course of the fifteenth century, however, allowing this emblem to take on prominence as the ancestral Gauls displaced the Trojans.”

³ Lecomte, *Paroles*, 181.

to attain the Rhine frontier can the natural frontiers controversy be unraveled, even though it will probably never be permanently resolved. Highlighting the war will also help to demonstrate the real, human consequences of abstract notions like natural frontiers – a point as relevant today as it was in the eighteenth century. Thus, this book explores Revolutionary France's war of conquest in the Rhineland to better understand the relationship between ideas, politics, and war in the French Revolution.

As the subtitle of this book makes clear, this book emphasizes the importance of the natural frontiers policy and pays close attention to the French armies that fought in several grueling campaigns to conquer the Rhine frontier – most significantly the Army of the Sambre and Meuse. As the tool of the French state that actually conquered and occupied Belgium and the Rhineland, this institution was vital to France's imperialistic crusade in Western Europe. In considering the French state's war of conquest in the Rhineland, this book makes three central arguments. First, when several leaders of the French Revolution embraced the natural frontiers framework as a foreign policy platform, they brought the idea into the political mainstream for the first time in French history. Put simply, Sorel's thesis is no longer tenable and should be finally discarded by historians of French diplomatic history. This argument helps us to understand the dramatic changes in French foreign policy during the French Revolution. While continuities between the Old and New Regimes existed in other areas, foreign policy was one sphere where change mattered most. Second, the natural frontiers policy played an important but limited role in French military strategy during the French Revolution, as practical and more conventional military concerns often predominated. Nonetheless, by inhibiting peace with Austria and prolonging the war, the pursuit of natural frontiers overcommitted the armies of the French Republic, contributing in large part to the degeneration of their overall military effectiveness in the German theater. Third, the experience of the Sambre and Meuse Army as a tool of expansion proves consequential not only for our understanding of the French war effort and foreign policy but also for our comprehension of the French Revolution's pursuit of natural frontiers and its failed democratic experiment. The natural frontiers policy did not unify disparate factions of the Revolutionary leaders; instead, fundamental disagreements over the Rhine Question exacerbated existing political tensions and created additional turbulences that ultimately weakened the legitimacy of the First French Republic. This is not intended as a revival of the primacy of war and foreign policy paradigm, but it is meant as a reminder that war and foreign policy greatly impacted the course of the French Revolution.

The analysis of change and continuity remains one of the historian's most valuable contributions to human thought. The natural frontiers debate – and the broader topics of war and revolution – provide excellent vehicles for such analysis. Sorel's contention that the pursuit of natural frontiers represented a legacy of the French monarchy that the Revolution simply inherited does not hold the same level of acceptance that it did for much of the twentieth century, yet it retains much influence. Despite the century that has passed since his death, Sorel is still regarded as the leading diplomatic historian of the period and he remains widely regarded as the authority on the natural frontiers policy. In general agreement with Sorel's critics, this book argues that the revolutionaries – not the French kings or their royal ministers – first pursued the Rhine frontier as a foreign policy objective. In fact, the evidence that has accumulated since Sorel's work was published is practically overwhelming that no French monarch or royal minister before 1792 advocated French annexation of the entire left bank of the Rhine. Even in the 1780s, when the Bourbon monarchy had led France to a geopolitical nadir, no serious policymaker urged expansion to the frontiers of ancient Gaul as a means of spurring national regeneration. In fact, the proponents of natural frontiers during the ancien régime occupied a decidedly oppositional position. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of the most explicit natural frontiers theorists, was certainly no friend of the Bourbons while the most important champion of France's claim to the Rhine in the 1780s, Anacharsis Clootz, was not even French and believed that France could not achieve its historical frontiers until the monarchy had disintegrated.

Yet the focus of this book is not on refuting Sorel's thesis, but instead on moving beyond the historiographical debate to explore the deeper meaning of the natural frontiers doctrine for the French Revolution and the wars that it unleashed upon Europe. This book attempts to answer some basic questions about the natural frontiers policy within the context of a political and military history. These questions include: when and why did France first pursue the “natural frontier” on the Rhine? Did this objective achieve universal support among French Revolutionary political and military leaders, as is often suggested? Why did the war for the Rhine frontier shift from an ideological crusade to a more pragmatic enterprise? Ultimately, how did the war of expansion in the Rhineland – which was at least partially inspired by the natural frontiers doctrine – impact the French Revolution? The book is not principally concerned with the influence of the French Revolution on the Rhineland or the Holy Roman Empire, though it engages with the valuable works that already exist on that topic by scholars such as T. C. W. Blanning, Michael Rowe, and Josef Smets among others. Instead, it is principally a work of French

history that addresses aspects of German history but nonetheless remains especially focused on the topics of French nationalism, identity, and warfare.

As this book explains, the pursuit of natural frontiers by the French was rooted not in the foreign policy traditions of the monarchy so much as in the ideology of Enlightenment republicanism. Even more to the point, it was made possible as a foreign policy only after the French Revolution abandoned many of the monarchy's geopolitical traditions during a period of military crisis. As this book demonstrates, it need not have become the dominant influence on French foreign policy with the fall of the Bastille, as it remained only a minor topic of concern even for Enlightenment theorists. In fact, many of the most ardent revolutionaries vehemently opposed the pursuit of the Rhine frontier for a variety of political, philosophical, and strategic reasons, a point often overlooked in many descriptions of the Revolution's foreign policy. The famous "No Conquests" decree of 1790 saw the National Assembly declare any war involving territorial expansion as antithetical to the New Regime's ideology. Maximilien Robespierre rejected war in 1792 and claimed that France would permanently endanger itself to internal and external enemies. When he ruled France during the Reign of Terror he renounced the Rhine frontier and pursued a policy to strengthen France's traditional borders. The natural frontiers were actually first pursued by a political faction based around Jacques-Pierre Brissot, which became predominant during the period of "war hysteria" in early 1792. This book shows that Brissot's particular concoction of republican militarism – which drew on Enlightenment theory as well as circumstantial paranoia – was the essential requirement for transitioning the natural frontiers from a philosophical dream into a foreign policy reality. Nonetheless, the vision of the Rhine River as one of France's natural frontiers remained a highly contested aspect of French strategic culture and ideology throughout the French Revolution. Far from unifying the nation, the natural frontiers doctrine – along with foreign policy more generally – deserves greater recognition for constituting one of many points of debate that ultimately fractured the supposedly "one and indivisible" Republic.

Readers should note that the book begins at a broader political-intellectual level and gradually embraces a greater military focus. The constant interplay between war, politics, and ideas constitutes one of the book's major themes. In fact, the role of contingency must be recognized as of primary importance in this story. Brissot's almost fanciful foreign policy – inspired largely by ideology – proved utterly disastrous for France and nearly led to the Revolution's demise in 1792. Although the Revolution was famously saved at Valmy, the frustrating experience of

the resuming Austro-Prussian invasion coupled with the rapid expansion of the First Coalition in 1793 proved a sobering experience for many revolutionaries and vindicated Robespierre's forceful criticisms of Brissot. Military events had a profound impact on politics. The famous French Organizer of Victory – Lazare Carnot – was highly influenced by the pendulum-like nature of the French war effort in 1792–1793. Although he famously referenced France's claim to the Rhine in early 1793, Carnot became the most important critic of the natural frontiers policy between 1793 and 1797. As this book explains, after 1793 Carnot proposed and consistently outlined a vision for French expansion that limited new territory to Flanders and parts of Belgium, essentially modifying and extending the fortified boundaries that France inherited from the days of Marshal Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban. Carnot's warnings that French annexation of the Rhineland would lead to permanent war with Austria and Great Britain were largely unheeded by 1797, however, and his wise assertion that perpetual war might generate negative domestic political side effects was soon vindicated.

While this book examines political and philosophical debates in depth, it never loses sight of the war fought over these theoretically intractable disputes. The campaigns examined in *Revolutionary France's War of Conquest in the Rhineland* have received scant attention in recent decades. This study examines campaign history within the context of the larger questions of politics and ideology. It seeks greater clarity on the basic aims of French Revolutionary foreign policy and military strategy. Understanding the dynamic relationship between ideology and pragmatism in the French war effort requires analysis of politics and ideas but also rigorous exploration of issues often relegated to “nuts-and-bolts” military history. Thus, topics such as logistics, command, discipline, sieges, and battles figure prominently alongside discussions of popular sovereignty and republicanism. It is, nonetheless, important to comprehend that this war was fought between armies on the frontier and between French politicians at home. The persecution and ultimate execution of the Brissotins in 1793 showed the capacity for military and foreign policy debates to inject venomous personal antagonisms into Revolutionary politics, providing one key catalyst for the Reign of Terror. Even after the Reign of Terror was ended by the events of 9 Thermidor (27 July 1794), foreign policy proved a source of bitter hostilities. Fittingly, this book concludes with an analysis of the coup of 18 Fructidor (4 September 1797), which purged Carnot from the French executive body, the Directory. While this coup is often viewed through a purely domestic lens, this book argues that Carnot was illegally removed from the Directory because of his opposition to French annexation of the

Rhineland and the natural frontiers policy. Unsurprisingly, annexation became the Directory's official position immediately after the coup and the natural frontiers doctrine was fully revived in a more pragmatic light. Soon, however, Napoleon Bonaparte's vision of a French-dominated Europe led France far beyond the Republic's so-called natural frontiers. The Rhine had been a sufficient barrier even for the Romans. It could not satiate Napoleon's ambition.

By examining the French army's role in the conquest of Belgium and the Rhineland, this book sheds new light on the relationship between ideology and the Revolutionary armies, a theme pursued by several historians but perhaps most importantly by Jean-Paul Bertaud and Alan Forrest. In particular, this book reveals that the natural frontiers ideology only had a limited influence on the Sambre and Meuse Army's campaigns in Belgium and the Rhineland. Nonetheless, troops from the Army of the Sambre and Meuse participated in the coup that purged Carnot – the most consequential critic of the natural frontiers doctrine. Historians have viewed this army's actions as evidence of either its support for annexation or its profoundly republican makeup, as the coup was also directed at royalist legislators. However, this book suggests that the Army of the Sambre and Meuse was simply following the orders of its commander, General Lazare Hoche, who was playing a dangerous game of political rivalry with Bonaparte. In fact, the army had little attachment to the Rhineland. For three years it had suffered in the hostile Rhenish war land without sufficient supplies or food and without achieving great success against the Austrian army, an insight that helps to qualify a long-standing historiographical framework that tends to exaggerate the military effectiveness of the French Revolutionary armies. Regardless, the army's role in the coup of 18 Fructidor was the death knell for the emerging and unstable democratic governance that existed in Revolutionary France and set in motion events that led to Bonaparte's overthrow of the Directory in 1799. In this manner, the French desire to spread liberty to the Rhineland undermined their own democratic experiment, even before Napoleon's imperial eagles took the place of the Gallic cock.

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