

Feminine Representations of Alsace: The *Alsacienne* at the Franco-German Border

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Introduction

As a border region between two nation-states, Alsace has played a crucial role in the construction of both France and Germany, particularly in defining borders and national identities. The region changed nationality four times between 1870 and 1945, and developed a Franco-German culture and identity. French, since the Treaty of Munster signed in 1648, Alsace was lost by France and given to Germany after the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. After Germany's defeat in the First World War, Alsace returned to France for twenty-two years before being annexed by the Third Reich in 1940. Finally, after the Second World War, Alsace returned to France. With each change of nationality, the local population learned to adapt to new laws, languages and cultures. For most, this meant performing a French or German identity depending on the political context. Oscillating between two nations, the Alsatians developed a hybrid local identity based on Germanic dialect and traditions, associated with a French political culture. Social, political, familial or economic, transnational exchanges between the local Alsatian population, and populations in France and Germany never stopped. Alsatian identity was built through the local population's networks and exchanges across the border.¹ In that respect, Alsatian identity and symbols are profoundly transnational, and have been used on both sides of the Rhine to communicate ideas about Alsace and national belonging across borders.

One figure that provided a stable sense of identity throughout these turbulent changes of nationality is the *Alsacienne*, a young woman wearing the Alsatian folk costume. Since the 1870s, her image has become a common representation of Alsace and a symbol of the complex issues of identity in the border region. Symbolising Alsace's Franco-German past and unique identity, and an idealised rural past and femininity, the *Alsacienne* is often considered simply as part of the local folk culture. From war memorials and museums to tablecloths, beer bottles, and political leaflets, her image has been and remains used for political, cultural, and marketing purposes. At the Franco-German border, however, the *Alsacienne* is more than a folk rep-

1 Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London: Routledge, 2009), 2-3.

resentation of the region, but a political statement used alternatively by the French press and the local population to promote different discourses about identity in Alsace. Images of the *Alsacienne* were understood in Germany, too, where they were also used as a symbol of national unity and belonging. However, the overwhelming number of pro-French representations of the *Alsacienne* between 1870 and 1918 established the *Alsacienne* as a symbol of French belonging, even in Germany. In 1940, Alsace was placed under Nazi rules, and statues of *Alsaciennes* were destroyed as they were considered ‘too French’. The *Alsacienne* thus rapidly became a transnational symbol of the region used and understood across the Franco-German border to communicate ideas of national belonging. Feminine representations of Alsace therefore play a crucial role in informing the relationship between Alsace, France, and Germany, and the perception of the region on a local, national, and transnational level. This chapter argues that, in contested borderland where identity is a complex issue, feminine images provide a powerful symbol for local, national, and transnational communities who use this image to promote different narratives about the region and national belonging.

Though an important character of Alsatian culture, surprisingly little literature has focused on the *Alsacienne*. Sara Hume’s recent book on *Regional Costume: Between Tradition and Modernity* (2022) paints a comprehensive picture of the Alsatian costume’s evolution, considering the costume as an artefact, museum object, religious performance or element of a living history reenactment.² Hume argues that clothing conveys different levels of meaning, allowing for competing narratives about the region and the nation to be represented by one costume.³ In Alsace, the *Alsacienne* and her costume provided a symbol of the region that could be interpreted differently by French and Alsatian audiences, and became a symbol of the region that fitted both local and national narratives. Barbara Gatineau’s *De la Campagne au musée: étude et collecte du costume traditionnel alsacien entre 1900 et 1918*, and Florence Charpigny *Compte-rendu de l’Exposition “Quelques paillettes, un peu de soie. Coiffes d’Alsace du XVIIIe et du début du XIXe siècle”* provide an important insight into the costume as a museum artefact, its evolution, and the collection choices that have popularised the costume from the region of Kochesberg (near Strasbourg) throughout Alsace.⁴ Charpigny argues that the establishment of the *Alsaci-*

2 Sara Hume, *Regional Dress: Between Tradition and Modernity* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Art, 2022), 15–200

3 *Ibid.*, 11.

4 Barbara Gatineau, “De la campagne au musée: étude et collecte du costume traditionnel Alsacien entre 1900 et 1918,” in *Les Costumes Régionaux*, ed. Jean-Pierre Letuillier (Rennes:

enne's costume at the end of the nineteenth century transformed the use of the traditional costume, which became 'staged' on the public scene. Removed from its original and traditional use as a marker of wealth, religion or marital status, the costume became a unifying symbol of folk culture. The diversity of costumes disappeared to be replaced by one style of dress turned emblem of the region and its population as a whole.⁵ Previous work has therefore studied the *Alsacienne's* costume and its evolutions, but little has been written on the *Alsacienne* herself as a cultural and political representation of the region.

Despite the extensive use of the image of the *Alsacienne* on the political, social, economic and cultural scene, her role beyond folk symbol has not received much attention. The *Alsacienne* is more than a dummy for the costume: works of historical fiction (notably *L'Alsacienne*, by Maurice Denuzière in 2009; or the 1996 movie *Les Alsaciens ou les deux Mathilde*, directed by Michel Favart and later made into a novel), as well as marketing campaigns (*Le marché de l'Oncle Hansi*, or *Meid'la* for example), present the *Alsacienne* as a romanticised yet central character and symbol of Alsatian identity politics.⁶ This chapter traces the *Alsacienne* from her 'invention'⁷ as a representation of Alsace to the use of her image in the Franco-Prussian War, as well as later performances by locals using her costume as a political and cultural representation of Alsace in processions, demonstrations, or for folk displays, following World War I. It argues that since the nineteenth century, the *Alsacienne* has been a stable symbol of Alsace. Representing the region and embodying conflicting narratives about Alsatian identity, images of the *Alsacienne*, and particularly performances of the *Alsacienne* by the local population, remain a communication tool to defend the local narrative about Alsace and its identity, memory and international relations. Three Franco-German conflicts made the *Alsacienne* a transnational political symbol of the region, and an emblem of contradicting local and national identities at the Franco-German border. Since the 1950s, her image has been reclaimed by the local population to become a symbol of Alsace's unique Franco-German culture, identity and history. As a stable symbol of the region, the *Alsacienne* was, and is, at the heart of Alsatian identity.

PUR, 2009), 67-78; Florence Charpigny, "Compte-rendu de l'exposition 'Quelques paillettes, un peu de soie'. Coiffes d'Alsace du XVIII^e et du début du XIX^e siècle", Colmar, Musée Unterlinden, 21 Novembre 2009-28 Février 2010". HAL Open source (2010), halshs-00581726, available at <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00581726/>, 1-4.

5 Charpigny, "Compte-rendu de l'exposition", 4.

6 Maurice Denuzière, *L'Alsacienne* (Paris: Fayard, 2011); Michel Favart, dir. *Les Alsaciens ou les deux Mathilde* (France, Germany: Pathe Television, 1996, DVD).

7 I am here using the term 'invention' in Hobsbawm's sense of invented tradition. Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction", in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 1.

The Birth of the *Alsacienne*: a transnational symbol?

The *Alsacienne*, as a character and representation of Alsace, was invented at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Turn-of-the-century modernity and nation-building led populations throughout Europe to rethink their connection to an idealised past and lost traditions.⁸ Growing interest in regional traditions and costumes in urban areas of both France and Germany led to the publication of a number of articles and books depicting the *Alsacienne*.⁹ She rapidly became a popular symbol of Alsace that acknowledged the region's Franco-German past and identity.

The *Alsacienne* is commonly pictured as a young girl or woman wearing the Alsatian folk costume made of a large colourful skirt, covered by an apron, whilst a bodice, stomacher, scarf, and laced collar cover her upper body. The most famous piece of this costume is the headdress, a large bow sitting on the back of the head. Traditionally, this costume was only worn in the rural region of Kochesberg near Strasbourg, as each village had its own traditional dress.¹⁰ Charles Spindler depicts the variety of Alsatian costumes from the Grendelbruch costume with its bonnet, to the Sundgau's large summer straw hat.¹¹ Though early publications displayed a variety of Alsatian costume (see, for example, Charles Enrich's *Collection de Six Costumes Nationaux Alsacien et Badois*, or Charles Spindler and Anselm Laugel's *Costumes et Coutumes d'Alsace*), the reproduction of images from Kochesberg established the costume with the large bow as a symbol of Alsace as a whole.¹² These works were published in both France and Germany: *Costumes et Coutumes d'Alsace* was published in Germany in 1902 under the title *Trachten und Sitten im Elsass*. The *Alsacienne* was therefore portrayed as belonging to both French and German traditions, a character that could easily cross the border and take part in the construction of both nations. The *Alsacienne* is an invented representation of Alsace, produced by local and transnational artists as a symbol of Alsatian culture, identity and folklore for French and German audiences.

The choice of this specific costume as a symbol of Alsace reveals the region's partially German culture and identity. On both sides of the Rhine,

8 Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction", 1, 4, 14; Pierre Nora, "Introduction to Realms of Memory Volume 2," in *Realms of Memory, Volume 2: Traditions*, ed. Pierre Nora (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), xi.

9 Hume, *Regional Dress*, 59–83.

10 Charpigny, "Compte-rendu de l'exposition", 4.

11 Charles Spindler, "Costume de Grendelbruch, anciens bonnets de Colmar, Altkirch" and "Ancien Costume du Sundgau", 1902, Collection Numérique: Images d'Alsace, Bibliothèque Nationale Universitaire, Strasbourg.

12 Hume *Regional Dress*, 57, 92.

the same images of the *Alsacienne* in the Kochesberg costume were used and reproduced to depict Alsatian customs and traditions. Interestingly, whilst the *Alsacienne's* costume was depicted as part of the French regional costumes, some publications underlined the similarities between the Alsatian costume and that of the neighbouring German region of Baden-Württemberg.¹³ In *Collection de six Costumes Nationaux Alsaciens et Badois*, Charles Enrich depicts a young woman from Kochesberg on page 1, and a young woman from Kehl (Germany) on page 6.¹⁴ The similarities between the two costumes are striking: they wear the same skirt and apron, a similar bodice, and most importantly, the same black bow. Here, the *Alsacienne's* costume explicitly highlights Alsace's complex Franco-German past. The nineteenth century marked an important period of rising German national consciousness. The fear of French invasions led communities across the Germanic world to develop a sense of German nationhood defined by a shared German culture and identity.¹⁵ Shared traditions and the idea of a common cultural past played a crucial role in reinforcing this feeling of national belonging.¹⁶ The production of images promoting the idea of a common culture and identity between southern German communities and Alsace, at a time when Alsace was French, supported the idea of a common past, culture and identity, and the notion of a culturally and ethnically German Alsace.

Famous Alsatian illustrators such as Hansi, Charles Spindler and Gustave Doré used the *Alsacienne* as a symbol of the region and its unique culture and history.¹⁷ In *Mon Village* (1913), a book depicting everyday life in a rural Alsatian village, Hansi portrays Alsatian women in costume, performing everyday tasks (baking, walking to church, or caring for the children).¹⁸ Though by the end of the nineteenth century, the costume was only worn for special occasions, Alsatian artists chose to use it to represent a rural Alsace.¹⁹ For them, the *Alsacienne* and her costume were symbols of an idealised and picturesque region maintaining long-lost traditions, rather than a realistic representation of Alsace.²⁰ Illustrators, therefore, used the costume as a

13 *Ibid.*, 62.

14 Charles Enrich, *Collection de Six Costumes Nationaux Alsaciens et Badois* (Strasbourg: Schmidt and Grucker, 1834), 1, 6.

15 Felix Kersting, Nikolaus Wolf, "On the Origins of national identity. German nation-building after Napoleon," *Journal of Comparative Economics* 52 (2024): 465-467.

16 Kersting & Wolf, 467.

17 *Ibid.*, 93.

18 Hansi, *Mon Village: ceux qui n'oublent pas* (Paris: H. Floury, 1913), 7, 9, 11, 20-21.

19 Laird Boswell, "From liberation to purge trials in the 'Mythic Provinces': Recasting French identities in Alsace and Lorraine, 1918-1920," *French Historical Studies* 23, no. 1 (2000): 135.

20 Gatineau, "De la campagne au musée", 68.

symbol of an idealised Alsace, rather than as an accurate representation of regional rural life. As a symbol of a rural and traditional Alsace, images of the *Alsacienne* were used on both sides of the Franco-German border. Although the meaning of these images differed between both nations, from the nineteenth century through to the First World War, the *Alsacienne* remained a transnational symbol of Alsace, understood as such and used as a symbol of belonging and nation-building in both France and Germany. At the turn of the twentieth century, whilst the costume was slowly abandoned in rural areas, interest in old customs and costumes grew in urban centres.²¹ In France and Germany, urban areas were quickly entering modernity, and concerns rose about the development of a new social and gender order.²² In France especially, after the 1871 defeat against Prussia, anxiety rose about low natality, depopulation, and the rise of feminism, which were perceived as a threat to the nation.²³ The *Alsacienne* provided a perfect image for this form of nostalgia, as pictures of the *Alsacienne* caring for her children, baking, or dancing in the arms of a young man clearly portrayed the region as a stronghold for pre-industrial social and familial structures.²⁴ The *Alsacienne* represents a very traditional femininity focused on traditional motherly and housewifely duties, a role that defined women's function in French society under the Third Republic (1870-1940).²⁵ The *Alsacienne*'s costume itself, with its large apron, ankle-length skirt, and chaste covering of the chest is a clear reminder of a woman's role within the home, as well as an image of purity and innocence, for modernising urban populations concerned about the evolution of women's fashion and the associated women's emancipation.²⁶ The

21 *Ibid.*, 73-4. On the revival of old regional dress as a modern movement, just as the dress is about to disappear, see the Scottish example in: Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The invention of tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland", in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 15-41.

22 Judith Surkis, *Sexing the citizen: morality and masculinity in France, 1870-1920* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), 71.

23 Elinor Accampo, Christopher Forth, "Introduction: Confronting modernity in fin-de-siècle France: bodies, minds and gender", in *Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-siècle France: bodies, minds and gender*, ed. Elinor Accampo and Christopher Forth (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010); Accampo, "The gendered nature of Contraception", 235; Virginie De Luca Barrusse, "Premiers jalons d'une politique familiale," *Information Sociales* 3, no. 189 (2015): 21; Joshua Cole, "'There are only good mothers': The ideological work of women's fertility in France before World War I," *French Historical Studies* 19, no. 3 (1996): 643.

24 Elizabeth Vlossak, *Marianne or Germania? Nationalizing Women in Alsace, 1870-1946* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 205; Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen*, 1.

25 Elinor Accampo, "The gendered nature of contraception in France: Neo-Malthusianism, 1900-1920," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 34, no. 2 (2003): 261-62.

26 Hume, *Regional Dress*, 8, 59, 94, 96, 210; Ida Blom, "Gender and nation in international comparison," in *Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender Order in the long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ida Blom, Karen Hagemann, Catherine Hall (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 11-14.

Alsacienne provided a reassuring image that perfectly suited France's definition of femininity, which was centred on motherhood, domesticity, and the purity of the maternal body, to be protected by the nation's strong men.²⁷

The *Alsacienne*'s bow also contributed to promoting traditional gender relations. In Protestant households, women and girls wore black bows, whilst in the Catholic tradition, only married women wore the black bow.²⁸ Images of the *Alsacienne* almost always portray her with a black bow: even young girls wear the black bow in Hansi's images. Whilst this interpretation was probably missed by national French and German audiences, in Alsace—where these images also circulated—the meaning behind the bow was probably obvious. The *Alsacienne*'s black bow acknowledged the region's Germanic protestant tradition, whilst in a Catholic interpretation, the bow was seen as a representation of a traditional femininity defined by marriage and motherhood.²⁹ The *Alsacienne* and her black bow are therefore a representation of a traditional femininity that fits France's definition of gender roles within the nation, whilst also acknowledging the region's German religious tradition. The *Alsacienne* provided one symbol for a multitude of interpretations, confirming Alsace's Franco-German culture, hybrid identity and the transnational nature of local emblems such as the *Alsacienne*. Borderlands, characterised by cross-border cultural exchanges, are often important transnational spaces where national cultures are in constant interaction, thus creating a hybrid local identity.³⁰ In Alsace, this hybrid local identity rests on a form of nostalgia for an idealised past embodied by feminine images. Regardless of national belonging, the border region was perceived transnationally—in France and in Germany—as a stronghold for a traditional, pre-industrial form of society, symbolised by reassuring images of innocent young women, as opposed to urban modernity and its New Women.

The *Alsacienne* at war: from folk to politics

While the *Alsacienne* was a seemingly peaceful acknowledgement of Alsace's French character and German past in the nineteenth century, the start of seventy-five years of Franco-German tensions and wars placed the *Alsacienne* at the centre of political discourses about Alsace, identity, nationality and belonging. The Franco-Prussian War, and the years leading up to the First World War, turned Alsace into a Franco-German 'cultural battle-

²⁷ Vlossak, *Marianne or Germania*, 205.

²⁸ Hume, *Regional Dress*, 19.

²⁹ Hansi, *Mon Village*, 9-11, 18-19, 20, 23, 27-28.

³⁰ Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism*, 5-7.

field' and saw the *Alsacienne* play an important role in pro-French propaganda.³¹ Depicted by pro-France artists as longing if not fighting for France, the *Alsacienne* became the symbol of a French Alsace, and of the region's enduring loyalty to France despite German authority. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the *Alsacienne* had become a politicised symbol of Alsace.³² In these political images, traditional gender roles were reversed, and femininity was given an active role in the public sphere. Used as a justification for the war and motivation for French troops, the *Alsacienne* became the main character of a pro-French narrative about Alsatian identity.

The politicisation of the *Alsacienne's* image started with the 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian War and Jean-Jacques Henner's famous 1871 *Alsace: Elle attend* ("Alsace. She is waiting"). The painting, originally intended for Leon Gambetta (French politician known in the 1870s for supporting the *Revanche*, a political movement demanding the return of Alsace to France³³), represents a young *Alsacienne* dressed in black, as in mourning, looking at the viewer with an expression of sadness. The title by her head suggests that she is 'Alsace', and therefore a representation of the region as a whole, waiting to be rescued by France. The young *Alsacienne* is wearing the French tricolour cockade on her bow, symbol of her French identity. This representation associated the bow, and by extension Alsace, with austerity, pain, and suffering.³⁴ More than a representation of the region, the *Alsacienne* became a political statement: she represents the region and its attachment to France, as well as a promise that Alsace will wait and maintain its French culture until she is liberated from Germany. After France's defeat in 1871, whilst many in France defended the idea of *Revanche*, the French government never seriously considered going to war with Germany to claim Alsace back.³⁵ In this period, and until the beginning of the First World War, the

31 Detmar Klein, "Battleground of Cultures: 'Politics of identities' and the national question in Alsace under German imperial rule (1870-1914)," *Revue d'Alsace*, no. 132 (2006): 3; See also the significant role of the Service d'Etude d'Alsace-Lorraine in this process. Philippe Jian, "'L'Alsace Lorraine française': aspects et limites d'une propagande d'Etat pendant la Grande Guerre," *Le temps des médias* 1, no. 22 (2014): 176.

32 Hume, *Regional Dress*, 3, 183.

33 *Revanche* (revenge) was French a movement following the 1871 defeat, arguing that Alsace was rightfully French, and that it was France's duty to fight for its liberation from Germany. For more information on the *Revanche*, see: François Caron *La France des Patriotes* (Evreux: Fayard, 1998), 242-244; Bertrand Joly "La France et la Revanche (1871-1914)," *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* (1954-), no. 46 Vol. 2 (1999): 325-47.

34 Charpigny, "Compte-rendu de l'exposition", 5.

35 Joly "La France et la Revanche(1871-1914)", 326; Landry Charrier "Le mythe de la France revancharde dans l'historiographie allemande des années 1919-1937" *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*. no. 110, Vol. 2 (2011): 59-66.

Alsacienne was portrayed in France as a young woman longing and mourning for France, waiting for the day France would take the region back, in very peaceful and austere images. The image of the *Alsacienne* mourning for France became a common image used by famous artists. In 1872, Gustave Dorée painted *L'Alsace Meurtrie*, depicting a mourning *Alsacienne* holding a French flag, and in 1913 Hansi portrayed a young *Alsacienne* weeping France's 1871 loss against Prussia in *L'histoire d'Alsace*. The *Alsacienne*, therefore, became a political character at the centre of a pro-French narrative about Alsace.



Fig. 1: Hansi, *Histoire d'Alsace* (Paris: Floury, 1913), 93.

Images of the *Alsacienne* with the tricolour cockade were rapidly echoed in the French press, and the *Alsacienne* came to the forefront of pro-French propaganda.³⁶ Through the image of the young *Alsacienne*, Alsace is associated with ideas of purity, innocence and resilience: the *Alsacienne* is never depicted as defeated, but either fighting or waiting for France.³⁷ Whilst always associated with youth, femininity and loyalty to France, two very different types of *Alsaciennes* were promoted by propaganda images. One embodied a traditional femininity promoting traditional gender roles, and another represented a rebellious *Alsacienne* associated with values commonly considered masculine: violence, fighting spirit, and defiance. These images of the *Alsacienne* follow a long tradition of feminine representation of nations. In France, the *Alsacienne* can be interpreted as a local Marianne. Where Marianne is both an official representation of France and part of the national folklore, so is the *Alsacienne* on a local level.³⁸ Like Marianne, the *Alsacienne's* image was heavily used in First World War propaganda: Marianne as an emblem of the French *patrie* and the *Alsacienne* as an emblem of Alsace and the region's loyalty to the French nation.³⁹ In French propaganda, the *Alsacienne* represented both a traditional femininity and a more rebellious Marianne-like emblem.

The *Alsacienne* was often depicted as 'the distressed lady in need of rescue'. In these images, the *Alsacienne* is a representation of Alsace waiting and longing for France. Alsace is associated with values of purity, innocence, and vulnerability that need to be protected by the strong, French citizen-soldier, a powerful image in early twentieth-century France.⁴⁰ A 1914 French postcard depicts Marianne, symbol of the French Republic, supporting a French soldier ready for battle, whilst in the background, a young captive *Alsacienne* is beaten by a Prussian soldier.⁴¹ Rising tensions in Europe and the beginning of the First World War mark a shift in representations of the *Alsacienne*. No longer peacefully mourning for France, she is represented as being mistreated by Prussian soldiers, in distress, and in need of rescue. These images

36 Hume, *Regional Dress*, 80.

37 Tamar Mayer, "Gender ironies of nationalism: setting the stage," in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, ed. Tamar Mayer (New York: Routledge, 2000), 18.

38 Maurice Agulhon, "Marianne, Réflexions sur une histoire," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, no. 289 (1992): 316.

39 Agulhon, "Marianne, Réflexion sur une histoire", 318.

40 Blom, "Gender and nation in international comparison", 14-17; JIAN "'L'Alsace-Lorraine Française,'" 178; Mayer, "Gender ironies of nationalism", 10-11.

41 "Alsace, La France veut ta délivrance" in Philippe Wilmouth *Images de propagandes : L'Alsace-Lorraine de l'annexion a la Grande Guerre 1871-1919* (Chambray-les-Tours: Serge Domini Editeur, 2013), 152.

impart a sense of urgency, a justification for the war against Germany: it is France's duty to rescue the young, loyal and innocent *Alsacienne* being criminally attacked by German occupiers. The filial bond between Marianne and the *Alsacienne* in the French national narrative reinforced this propaganda; French soldiers were to fight the war to protect Marianne and rescue her daughter.

Images of the young *Alsacienne* in distress were used to motivate French troops on the front lines, where these postcards were distributed, as well as the home front, which was encouraged to support the war effort through subscription to a national fund.⁴² A 1918 poster by Auguste Leroux, illustrated with an *Alsacienne* waving and hugging her Lorrainer sister, reads: "To rush victory, and to reunite with us soon, subscribe".⁴³ In pro-French propaganda, the *Alsacienne* is a powerful and highly political representation of a French Alsace in a very one-sided discourse, depicting Alsace as a passive, threatened woman, and as Marianne's daughter, awaiting rescue by France. The *Alsacienne's* weakness is presented as a justification and motivation for the entire French population (on the front and at home) to support the war effort by fighting or donating money for the liberation of Alsace. These highly gendered images describe the nation's expectations for men's and women's roles within the national community.⁴⁴ Women were to care for children and the home, whilst being protected and defended by the active, fighting men defending them, and by extension, the nation.

The *Alsacienne* was also portrayed as the 'lost daughter', a representation of the region lost by Marianne (and therefore France) in a vocabulary centred on the national family.⁴⁵ Marianne, as a representation of the French republic and mother-nation, is portrayed hugging the *Alsacienne* and her Lorraine sister.⁴⁶ On 23 December 1917, French newspaper *Le Petit Journal* chose the image of a French soldier bringing the *Alsacienne* and her sister to Marianne, who welcomes them with open arms, a French flag floating over her head.⁴⁷ A subscription poster by Dominique Charles Fouqueray uses a similar image of two distraught women (Alsace and Lorraine) clinging to

42 Jian, "L'Alsace-Lorraine Française", 179.

43 Auguste Leroux, *Comptoir National D'Escompte de Paris*, 1918, in Wilmouth, *Images de Propagande*, 64.

44 Blom, "Gender and nation in international comparison", 14-17; Mayer, "Gender ironies of Nationalism", 16.

45 Mayer, "Gender ironies of Nationalism", 13.

46 Maurice Agulhon and Pierre Bonte, *Marianne*, 13-29; Maurice Agulhon, "Marianne, Réflexions sur une histoire", 316; Blom "Gender and nation in international comparison", 8.

47 "L'Espoir de la France pour l'an qui vient," *Le Petit Journal – Supplément Illustre*, no. 1409, Dec, 23, 1917.

their mother Marianne, with the simple injunction ‘*Souscrivez*’ (subscribe) above their head.⁴⁸ The French national family is presented as incomplete until the *Alsacienne* is returned to the mother-nation.

In pro-French images, the *Alsacienne*’s ‘Frenchness’ is never questioned, and she is presented as a French educator in the region. Women’s reproductive role was perceived not just as physical, but also as symbolic and cultural: they were believed to teach future generations the community’s accepted behaviours, culture, values and, ultimately, identity.⁴⁹ Within her own family, the *Alsacienne* was to nurture French culture and identity. Hansi depicts this crucial educational role when illustrating a sweets box with the image of an *Alsacienne* bringing a toy French soldier to her young child, in a scene entitled “His first toy”.⁵⁰ The *Alsacienne* is a representation of women’s educational role within the community, transmitting culture and identity to the next generation of citizens and thus maintaining the national community.⁵¹ Mothers were to teach national values to their children, encourage their love for the French nation and, most importantly, encourage them to fulfil a citizen’s duty to the nation: military service.⁵² The *Alsacienne* is presented as a role model for young Alsatian women, who, by following her example, remaining loyal to France and raising French citizens in German Alsace, will support the re-integration of the region into France.

Despite her apparent femininity and vulnerability, the politicisation of the *Alsacienne* also led to the production of images where young women are represented as strong fighting figures, defending the region and displaying values traditionally associated with masculinity. Far from Henner’s innocent and quiet young woman, these *Alsaciennes* embody strength, determination, and readiness to fight to defend themselves and the region. Traditional gender roles are reversed, and the *Alsacienne* is associated with an active fighting role. A First World War postcard shows an *Alsacienne*, standing tall, facing the German Emperor in front of a desolated village and pointing to the distance to Germany whilst the caption reads “Wilhelm the Second, the

48 Dominique Charles Fouqueray, *Souscrivez! Banque d’Alsace et de Lorraine*, in Wilmouth, *Images de Propagande*, 65.

49 Mayer, “Gender ironies of Nationalism”, 7; Hobsbawm, “Introduction”, 2-3.

50 “Son Premier Jouet”, Musée Hansi, Colmar.

51 Accampo, “The Gendered nature or Contraception”, 240; Silke Wenk, “Gendered representations of the nation’s past and future,” in *Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender order in the long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ida Blom, Karen Hagemann, Catherine Hall (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 64.

52 Susan R Grayzel, *Women’s identities at war*, 2-3.

cruel, emperor of the Barbarians, your reign is over".⁵³ The *Alsacienne* is here represented as the active agent in the community, booting the Germans out. Popular songs like *La Strasbourgeoise* also popularised the image of the rebellious *Alsacienne* resisting German authority, whilst an illustration of *Le bal de Strasbourg* by Villerme portrayed the *Alsacienne* stabbing a Prussian soldier in the chest.⁵⁴ Far from the young *Alsacienne* in need of rescue, these women are represented as powerful, in positions that at the time would be associated with masculinity. Agency and power were located with the local women rather than the French soldiers. In these pictures, the *Alsacienne* is represented as a strong, active and determined (or even violent) character, reversing traditional gender roles and representing a region ready to fight for itself. These more militant representations of the *Alsacienne* were initially created in the 1870s to promote in France the idea of *Revanche*, and were further developed during the First World War. Images of the *Alsacienne*, fighting alone against Prussian soldiers, depict an Alsace that not only remained loyal to France, but that France should support and avenge.

Whilst images of a femininity in distress, suffering at the hands of a barbaric enemy, were common in wartime propaganda throughout Europe, depictions of the *Alsacienne* as a fighting figure can be linked to representations of Marianne as a rebellious character during the French Revolution.⁵⁵ Marianne's daughter in the French national narrative, the *Alsacienne* is portrayed as a young woman who inherited her mother's revolutionary and fighting spirit. Images of the rebellious *Alsacienne* were produced to reinforce the idea that Alsace was indeed French by portraying the region in a Marianne or Jeanne d'Arc-like figure. To French viewers, images of revolutionary Marianne marching on the Bastille and of Jeanne d'Arc leading the troops were part of the French national narrative and identity. Representations of fighting *Alsaciennes* can therefore be interpreted as a demonstration of Alsace's French spirit and identity, thus justifying the war and French men's duty to 'liberate' Alsace for France.

Although less common than in the French press, images of the *Alsacienne* were also used in pro-German propaganda as a mobilising force and sym-

53 "Guillaume II le Cruel, Empereur des Barbares, Ton règne est fini" (1918), in Wilmouth *Images de Propagande*, 151.

54 Charles Clérice (illustration), Gaston Villerme, *Le Bal de Strasbourg ou le Viol de l'Alsacienne* (Paris: Bassereau et Clérice, 1886).

55 Susan R Grayzel, *Women's identities at war: gender, motherhood and politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 84-85; Maurice Agulhon and Pierre Bonte, *Marianne. Les visages de la République* (Evreux: Gallimard, 1992), 30-32.

bol of belonging and unity. In an anonymous 1914 postcard, the *Alsacienne* is portrayed at the centre of the image, surrounded by men, each representing a different social class and role in German society.⁵⁶ The title ‘Wir kennen keine Parteien mehr’ (we don’t know any parties anymore) is a reference to a speech given by the German emperor in August 1914 calling for the union of all forces in Germany on the eve of the First World War. At the centre, the *Alsacienne* is singing and walking alongside her fellow countrymen in an image of national unity. On another First World War postcard by Carl Jordan, a young *Alsacienne* and her Lorrainer sister are embraced and protected by mother Germania.⁵⁷ These images use exactly the same codes and symbols as those of the *Alsacienne*, encouraging French soldiers to fight for her, or those of the *Alsacienne* and Marianne. The ideas and symbols associated with the *Alsacienne*, and especially notions of tradition, family, union, nationhood and protection whilst serving different nations were transnational in their use. The same images were produced on both sides of the border to support ideas of union, nationhood and belonging, but to serve different nations.

As Franco-German tensions rose and the First World War broke out, the *Alsacienne* functioned as a symbol of a *French* Alsace, taking sides in the Franco-German conflict over the region. In these propaganda images, traditional gender roles were alternatively reinforced and challenged as the *Alsacienne* was depicted either as the perfect quiet, motherly, innocent and vulnerable woman or as a strong-minded, active and rebellious figure. This dual vision of the *Alsacienne* (and therefore Alsace) informed France’s perception of the region and fuelled French propaganda from 1870 to 1945. French troops expected to find a fully Francophile, costume-wearing *Alsacienne*, holding the tricolour flag in liberated Alsace. This belief rested notably on the least successful Germanisation of Francophile Alsatian women who conformed to France’s expectations, married French men and maintained a French culture in the region.⁵⁸ Propaganda images produced in France were inspired by these Francophile women and dismissed the role of women’s associations in promoting German patriotism in Alsace.⁵⁹ The integration of the region postwar proved much more difficult than the French government and population had hoped. Propaganda images developed during the war

56 Catherine Maurer, Jérôme Schweitzer, *Face au Nazisme, le cas alsacien*, catalogue d’exposition (Strasbourg: BNU Editions, 2022), 191.

57 *Ibid.*

58 Vlossak, *Marianne or Germania*, 91–92.

59 *Ibid.*, 91–106.

created in France, the belief in a French Alsace, untouched by forty-three years of Germanisation, which was far from realistic, and represented only a small portion of the population (namely, the Francophile middle-class). Nonetheless, during the 1918 liberation parades, Alsatian women willingly played the part of the *Alsacienne* and dressed in costume to welcome the French troops, in a show of support for those that France called Alsace's 'liberators'. In a society where women's place was often confined to the private sphere and housework, and where women were seen as needing protection by the active male soldier-citizen, the *Alsacienne's* politicisation brought Alsatian femininity into the masculine public sphere.⁶⁰ Representations of the *Alsacienne* played a central role in the public political sphere and became a means of communication about Alsace's identity.

Performing the *Alsacienne*: in defence of the local identity

Despite the very pro-French emphasis of most representations of Alsace and the *Alsacienne* in the first half of the twentieth century, some illustrators also used the *Alsacienne* to represent Alsace's unique regional culture and identity in picturesque images, portraying the young *Alsacienne* in traditional, rural villages. Throughout the area's multiple changes of nationality, the *Alsacienne*, remained a stable representation of Alsace, and provided a form of continuity and cohesion for the local community.⁶¹ Pattinson describes identity as 'a process of becoming through action'.⁶² The *Alsacienne* provided a narrative about Alsatian identity that withstood the changes of nationality, and a performance that reinforced the local community's identity.⁶³ For the region's inhabitants, she remained a symbol of their region and identity, an emblem that they could perform to promote their own idea of identity, community, and national belonging. The *Alsacienne* became more than an image: she became a performance used by local women who were aware of the *Alsacienne's* double meaning as symbol of both tradition and subversion of traditional femininity.⁶⁴ Today, performances of the *Alsacienne* are still used locally to represent the region and reclaim the local iden-

60 Juliette Pattinson, "'The best disguise': Performing femininities for clandestine purposes during the Second World War," in *Gender and Warfare in the Twentieth Century: Textual Representations*, ed. Angela Smith (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2004), 136-37; Susan Foley, *Women in France since 1789: the meaning of difference* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 2, 18, 23; James McMillan, *France and Women 1789-1914: gender, society and politics* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 48.

61 Hobsbawm, "Introduction," 2-3.

62 Pattinson, "'The Best disguise'", 133.

63 Hobsbawm, "Introduction," 5-7, 14.

64 Pattinson, "'The Best disguise'", 150.

tity from national narratives. Dressing up and performing the *Alsacienne* in the street has been a tool used by local populations since the beginning of the twentieth century, enabling them to communicate to the world their own definition of Alsatian identity and national belonging. Following Alsace's return to France, young women were invited to dress in costume to welcome the liberating troops. In November 1918, posters were displayed throughout Strasbourg, inviting: 'The TRULY ALSATIAN young ladies and young girls of Strasbourg, (no younger than sixteen years old), who intend on taking part in **welcoming the French troops in Alsatian costume**'.⁶⁵ A large tricolour cockade painted by the side of the text suggests that the young women were expected to wear the cockade on their costume, so as to somehow perform the roles of the cartoonists' wartime pro-French *Alsaciennes*.⁶⁶ Similar scenes were captured by the French television news after the Second World War, widely broadcast in France, and confirming what was perceived to be the celebration of the *Alsacienne*'s return into the motherly arms of Marianne.⁶⁷ For the local population, who celebrated the return of peace as much (if not more than) the return to France, this performance supported the integration of the region into France, whilst reminding the French government of its promise to protect Alsace's regional identity.⁶⁸

Interestingly, the same performance (minus the tricolour cockade) was used in the interwar—whilst Alsace was French territory—by a group of Alsatian villagers to demonstrate their attachment to Germany. On 14 June 1925, during the celebration of the *Jahrtausendfeier für die Rheinlande*, a delegation of Alsations took part in the parades dressed in costume.⁶⁹ This performance of the *Alsacienne* was used as a sign of German identity in Alsace, as the costume's similarities with German regional costumes suggested. Whether to assert a French or German identity, performances of the *Alsacienne* were an important platform to reinforce the local feeling of community and a vision

65 Archives de Strasbourg, 503 FI 56, *Avis Important*, Nov. 20, 1918, original emphasis.

66 Michelle Cliff, "Objects into Subjects: some thoughts on the work of black women artists," in *Imagining Women: Cultural Representations and Gender*, ed. Elizabeth Goodman et al. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 152.

67 INA, archives 'Histoire de l'Alsace', "Les Actualités Française : L'Alsace Libérée", Feb. 16, 1945, 1.04; available at <https://sites.ina.fr/archives-histoire-alsace/focus/chapitre/8>, accessed Dec. 2, 2021.

68 Joseph Schmauch, "Marseillaise, paradis tricolore et drapeaux par milliers. Les fêtes du retour de l'Alsace à la France (Novembre-Décembre 1918)," *Revue d'Alsace*, no. 141 (2015): 314, 318; Anne-Laure Fabre, "La fête et la guerre à Strasbourg durant la Première Guerre mondiale," *Revue d'Alsace*, no. 141 (2015): 315-16.

69 Georg Pahl, "Die Jahrtausendfeier für die Rheinlande in Berlin 1925," Bundesarchiv, Cd 800 (Sitte, Brauchtum, Feiern), Bild 102.

of an idealised, traditional past Alsace.⁷⁰ The use of the *Alsacienne*'s image, both as a demonstration of an enduring French identity or as a sign of German belonging by different groups outlines the *Alsacienne*'s hybridity and that of the culture she represents. Born as a hybrid character, at the cross-road between French and German cultures, she embodies the 'cultural third space' and the political potential of hybrid subjects.⁷¹ As a symbol of Alsace, used to support both assimilation to and contestation of the nation, the *Alsacienne* became a transnational means of communication for the local population to express different ideas of belonging and identity across borders.

In Alsace, performances of the *Alsacienne* remain a means of communicating local issues and concerns to the wider national and international communities, notably to protect the local memory narrative. The *Alsacienne* remains a prominent symbol of the local history and identity, with statues adorning many Alsatian war memorials, as a reminder that Alsace's war experience was different to France's. In Holtzheim, a town in the north of Alsace, the council has been looking for several years to promote a more historically accurate narrative about Alsace's experience during the First World War. On Remembrance Day (November 11), speeches insist on Alsace's unique experience: they comment on the fact that most Alsatian soldiers actually fought for Germany (an element forgotten by the French national history curriculum); that some Alsatian men fled to join the French army; and that Alsace lost men to both sides. Two men attend the ceremony, one dressed as a *feldgrau* (German First World War soldier), and the other as a *poilu* (French soldier). In 2021, the whole council came dressed in Alsatian folk costume. The mayor, Pia Imbs, gave a speech whilst dressed as an *Alsacienne* and wearing the French tricolour mayoral scarf. In these ceremonies, Alsace's hybrid culture and complex Franco-German past are clearly affirmed in a narrative focused on the local rather than the national and symbolised by the *Alsacienne*.

Under Pia Imbs's leadership, commemorations have become an influential space for the integration of Alsace's German past in the local memory narrative. The mayor of the twinned German village is regularly invited to take part in the ceremony. In one of Alsace's leading local newspapers, when reporting on the commemoration ceremony in 2021, a picture of the *Alsacienne* mayor standing next to her German counterpart was chosen to illus-

70 Jean-Claude Richez, "Ordre et désordre dans la fête: les fêtes de réception des troupes française en Alsace en Novembre 1918," *Revue des sciences sociales de la France de l'Est*, no. 12 (1983): 159-63.

71 Vince Marotta "Cultural hybridity", in *The Blackwell encyclopaedia of sociology* (2020): 1-4, 2-3.

trate an article entitled “A Franco-German homage to the victims of 14-18: a hymn to peace”.⁷² Rather than the image of the men in French and German uniform embracing and singing together, it was the picture of the *Alsacienne* beside the German mayor, facing the memorial, that was used to illustrate Franco-German peace and reconciliation. To the locals, this performance confirms the region’s identity as embedded in both French and German history, as well as the important role that the region should or could play in facilitating Franco-German relations. Through this performance, the *Alsacienne* represents the region as a bridge between two former enemies: she opens up a space where Franco-German culture, and therefore Franco-German commemoration, are possible.⁷³

As in wartime propaganda, this later *Alsacienne* has two very distinct images. Whilst performances of the *Alsacienne* are commonly used for commemoration, folklore, and to promote Franco-German reconciliation and collaboration, the *Alsacienne* is also a performance of discontent.⁷⁴ Her image is used to defend the local identity and the region’s special status within the French administrative system. The *Alsacienne*’s hybrid nature conferred a revolutionary and subversive potential to her image, thus making the *Alsacienne* a logical vessel for regionalist revendications.⁷⁵ In 2014, performances of the *Alsacienne* were at the centre of local protests against the French government’s decision to simplify France’s complex regional administrative system by merging Alsace, Lorraine, and Champagne-Ardenne into one region. In Alsace, this proposal was met with fierce opposition to what the local population considered an attack on their identity and culture. Demonstrations were organised throughout the year to convince the French government that Alsace, because of its unique culture and history, should remain a separate region. Though most participants dressed in their everyday clothes when taking part in the demonstrations, pictures chosen by French, German and local newspapers to illustrate the demonstrations showed the processions being led by women dressed as *Alsaciennes*, often surrounded by children. In the *Schwartzwälder Bode*, the picture shows women and young girls in costume holding hands at the front of the demon-

72 Ju. M., “Holtzheim, Hommage Franco-Allemand aux victimes de 14-18 : un hymne à la paix”, *Les Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace*, Nov. 11, 2021.

73 On hybridity subjects as bridges between cultures, see Vince Marotta “Cultural hybridity”, 3.

74 On the use of regional dress as a form of protest to a national identity, see the Scottish example in Hugh Trevor Roper, “The invention of tradition: the Highland Tradition of Scotland” in *The invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1983), 15-41.

75 Vince Marotta “Cultural hybridity”, 2-3.

stration.⁷⁶ In local newspaper *Les Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace*, a similar picture illustrates an article entitled “What makes the anti-merger run?”, showing women in costume surrounded by Alsatian flags leading the march.⁷⁷ In both articles, Alsatian femininity is depicted as the leading political force.

In the French newspaper *L'Express*, eight half-length portraits of women wearing the Alsatian bow illustrate an article entitled “How the Alsations are hoping to get out of Grand-Est”.⁷⁸ One of them is raising her fist, two have painted their faces in the colour of the Alsatian flag, and one of them has replaced the tricolour cockade on her bow with a large sign reading “Free Alsace” in Alsatian. The question asked by the article is answered clearly and very visually: women will get the Alsace out of the Grand-Est. The *Alsacienne* is taking on her political role once again, not to promote a French identity, but to empower the local population and defend the regional identity perceived to be under threat. Though the protests did not stop the government’s decision, it is telling that images of women in costume, and particularly of women with children, were used to illustrate these articles. For France and Germany, Alsatian femininity—and particularly the *Alsacienne*—remains associated with a crucial role in the public sphere, raising political issues and defending the region’s interest as well as a traditional vision of the region and femininity. As reminders of an idealised traditional and rural past, performances of the *Alsacienne* by the local population have become a political means of communication for the Alsations themselves.

Since the end of the Second World War, the *Alsacienne* has been reclaimed by the local population as a representation of the region, and its unique identity and history within France, rather than as a symbol of a French Alsace. Whilst the costume is still commonly used in local folklore and celebrations, performances of the *Alsacienne* in the public space are often a political statement in defence of the region’s identity. Performing the *Alsacienne*—that is, not just wearing the costume, but performing the type of behaviours associated with the *Alsacienne* since the beginning of the twentieth century—is a form of political display through which the local population reappropriates

76 Thierry Schauer, “Elsässer wehren sich gegen Fusion”, *Schwarzwälder Bote*, Dec. 16, 2014, available at: <https://www.schwarzwaelder-bote.de/inhalt.strassburg-elsaesser-wehren-sich-gegen-fusion.a1399c37-b776-450d-8508-d24f5d166f81.html>.

77 Christian Bach, “Qu’est-ce qui fait courir les ‘anti-fusion’? Réponse en portraits,” *Les Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace*, Dec. 13, 2014.

78 Michel Feltin-Palás, “Comment les Alsaciens espèrent sortir du Grand Est,” *L'Express*, Feb. 5, 2022, available at: https://www.lexpress.fr/politique/comment-les-alsaciens-esperent-sortir-du-grand-est_2167372.html.

a symbol often considered as an emblem of a French Alsace to express local concerns and protect the local identity.

Conclusion

Evidently, the *Alsacienne* is much more than a simple folk representation of the region: she functions, instead, as a complex political character. Representing traditional femininity and rural regionalism, her image has been used throughout the past two centuries in political representations of the region. As a stable symbol, she could support different narratives. Initially, she represented Alsace as a rural and traditional region sharing both French and German cultural heritage. Later, the succession of three Franco-German conflicts placed Alsace, and the *Alsacienne*, at the centre of war propaganda, notably in France, where cartoonists often used her image as a representation of the region's undying attachment to France, in images that both reinforced and challenged traditional gender roles. In Alsace itself, the *Alsacienne* was accepted as a representation of the region and of its people. Performances of the *Alsacienne* throughout Alsace were, and are, used for celebrations (religious celebrations, village fêtes, weddings, carnivals, etc.), but the *Alsacienne* has not lost her political undertones. Since 1918, performances in costume have been used by the locals to defend their own definition of Alsace, identity and national belonging.

The use of the *Alsacienne*'s image and performance on the political scene highlights the potential of hybrid transnational symbols to empower the local populations to reclaim a regional narrative. The hybrid nature of border cultures and of their emblems allows for local symbols to become powerful transnational vectors of political message for the local community. In borderlands, symbols of the local hybrid culture provide a stable system of identification for the local people, whilst allowing them to navigate different national identities, alternatively assimilating local and national narratives or challenging national belonging. At the border, regional symbols are fundamentally transnational, both in their construction influenced by neighbouring nations, and on the political scene where they are used by national and regionalist movements to promote different narratives of identity. The hybrid nature of border symbols reinforces the power of the messages conveyed by these images as they can easily cross borders and therefore question or challenge national belonging.

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