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Between fashion and folk *Dress practices in Alsace during the* *First World War*

Sara Hume

On November 22, 1918, the triumphant French forces entered Alsace following the German defeat. The victorious troops parading through the streets of Strasbourg were met with expressions of delirious joy from Alsatians. The festivities were documented in motion pictures, still photographs, postcards, posters, and countless illustrations (Figure 7.1). The girls, wearing enormous black bows, greeting the entering soldiers came to be the defining image of the day. The traditional costume of Alsace served as a symbol of the region, and in this enactment of Alsace's return to French control, the Alsatians received the French as their liberators.

The link in the popular imagination between the Alsatian traditional costume and loyalty to France deserves further consideration. Had the Germans prevailed after the First World War, would young Alsatian girls in traditional dress have flocked to meet the victorious German soldiers? In some ways, an embrace of Alsatian traditional dress might seem to be more consistent with German concepts of the nation than with the centralized vision of the nation embraced by France. However, a closer examination of dress practices in Alsace during the war reveals surprising differences between French and German strategies for securing loyalty and gaining military advantage: France focused on the symbolic power of the iconic image of women in traditional headbows; while Germany, which maintained political control of the region, deployed the clothing industry for its own war effort. The ways that Alsatians selected, produced, and wore their clothing represented a careful negotiation of the meanings imposed by the French and Germans.

To provide a little background about Alsace and its distinctive dress, it is important to understand Alsace's geographical situation right on the border between France and Germany. Its location put

Figure 7.1 *Henri Bacher, 22 Novembre 1918: L'Entrée glorieuse des troupes Françaises à Strasbourg, 1919. Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire, Strasbourg, NIM23827.*

Alsace in the center of the conflict between the two warring nations during the First World War. The region had long been disputed between the neighboring national powers. Between the seventeenth and the late nineteenth century, Alsace had been part of France. However, at the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, the newly unified German empire claimed Alsace as well as a portion of neighboring Lorraine. The loss of Alsace and Lorraine was a humiliating blow to France and was one of the grievances that fueled French hostility against Germany leading up to the First World War.

For Alsatians, the successive periods of rule by different national forces were deeply disruptive. The changes in political control of Alsace had created divided allegiances among the population. A significant number of Alsatians chose to retain French citizenship following German annexation in 1871 and hundreds of thousands moved to France.¹ This wave of emigration was primarily upper class: wealthy Alsatians who left a vacuum that was filled with a reciprocal wave of German immigrants into the region. By the time war broke out in 1914, an entire generation of Alsatians had grown up German. Young Alsatian men fought for Germany in the war. Despite the loyal service of Alsatians in wartime, soldiers from other parts of the German empire who were posted in Alsace during the war

were highly suspicious of the allegiance of Alsatian civilians. Although the Alsatian dialect was a variation of German similar to that spoken elsewhere in southwestern Germany and in Switzerland, a significant proportion of the region's residents were bilingual. French was frequently the language of communication for the wealthier and better educated. Linguistic choices were often interpreted as indicators of political allegiance and were strongly restricted by occupying German forces during the war. At this time, by contrast, the French were less concerned with the German aspects of Alsatian culture because their contact with the region's residents was limited.

The traditional dress that developed during the course of the nineteenth century became another aspect of Alsatian culture that served as a marker of allegiance. Distinctive dress styles emerged as an expression of Alsace's dual culture at the border between the two nations. In contrast to the religious homogeneity of France, Alsace's demographics reflect a similar diversity of religious beliefs as in Germany.² The tensions between Catholics and Protestants found display in traditional dress that differentiated between the two confessions. The quintessential folk costume was actually the style of dress worn in the region around Strasbourg. Although different parts of Alsace had costumes that were quite different, this particular style came to represent Alsace in the popular imagination. The costume included a skirt of heavy wool and a small bodice or corselet with stomacher over a white blouse with a wide collar. The most prominent feature of the costume was the small cap adorned with an enormous bow. Young Catholic girls wore brightly colored bows, while young Protestant girls wore black bows. The original link between religious affiliation and these costumes depended on their being worn for pious occasions including weddings, first communions, and festivals such as Fête-Dieu. By the early twentieth century, the political tensions in the region became paramount, and the primary occasions for wearing folk dress shifted from religious festivities to political rallies.

Alsations had worn traditional dress to political rallies well before the First World War. In fact, when Kaiser Wilhelm II (reign from 1888–1918) visited Strasbourg in 1877, he was greeted with a parade which included women dressed in their native *Tracht*.³ The women were seated in a wagon decorated with garlands that was pulled by a team of draft horses. Illustrations of the procession closely resemble an earlier illustration of a wedding cortege in which the groom escorts his bride and her maids of honor on their way to the church.⁴ Following the end of the First World War, women in rural Alsace filled very similar wagons festooned with garlands as they celebrated Liberation and the French victory.⁵ This precedent might support the idea that traditional dress was a flexible symbol that simply stood for the region and could be deployed for whichever nation happened to be in power. However, by 1918, the French had largely appropriated the political symbolism of the Alsatian folk costume to serve their own agenda. While the rural parades after 1918 continued to maintain the traditional use of costume, urban parades, particularly in Strasbourg, had changed in response to French propaganda. The way Alsations wore the costume and the form of the costumes themselves reflected the image of Alsations in French posters and popular culture.

By the 1910s, traditional dress continued to be worn only in small pockets of rural Alsace, while most Alsatians wore fashionable clothing largely indistinguishable from their French or German neighbors. Once the war broke out, the Germans recognized the powerful hold that the French fashion industry had. The industry was an important sector of the economy, but just as importantly, it fostered a positive image of French culture. Even though Germany produced a substantial segment of the ready-to-wear clothing not only purchased in Germany but also exported abroad including to France, Germans had a reputation for lacking taste and style.⁶ In Alsace, French influence over the fashion industry was especially widespread. Advertisements for clothing stores were written in French, even when they appeared in newspapers in which all of the editorial copy was written in German. Similarly, Alsatian fashion magazines such as *Album de Linge illustré* (Illustrated Album of Clothing) were given French titles even when the text was entirely in German. Shop owners assured their customers they were purchasing the latest Parisian models, even if the garments were actually made in Germany.⁷

Such examples of French domination of the fashion industry were the impetus behind the movement that emerged in Germany to promote an independent German fashion industry. The movement followed and drew inspiration from the better known efforts of the Deutscher Werkbund which promoted German industrial design more broadly. In a pamphlet that outlined the motivation and aims for the movement, Norbert Stern encouraged the German people to rise up against the “French fashion tyranny.”⁸ Alsatians joined this movement starting in early 1915, when those involved in the clothing and textile industries began organizing a working committee to promote their interests in the Chamber of Commerce in Strasbourg. The participants included men and women in the textile, lacemaking, tailoring and dressmaking trades as well as representatives of women’s groups and trade organizations.⁹ The chair of the committee, August Herborth, reported to the umbrella organization in Frankfurt, the Modebund.¹⁰ The coordinated efforts of the fashion industry to both support their economic interests and also improve the quality of design produced across Germany reflected an increasing national cohesion. While the fashion industry in Paris benefited from its centralization and complete lack of competition from other French cities, Germany had several fashion centers including Berlin, Frankfurt, and Munich. During the early years of the war, the enmity with France drove Germans, including Alsatians, to pursue their common interest across the disparate German states. Traditional dress practices, which emphasized the distinctions among the German states, were completely disregarded in favor of a fashionable idea of national dress.

The push in Alsace to eliminate French influence on fashion fitted in with a larger crackdown on the use of French language in the widely bilingual region. Department stores in Strasbourg at the turn of the century bore names such as the Louvre and Bon Marché, which were obviously unacceptable under the wartime regime. A sampling of letterhead from the Louvre during the course of the war shows the progressive Germanification.¹¹ An example of the prewar letterhead from 1911 clearly shows that the operation was run in German as a GMBH (a limited liability company) with German

signage despite its quintessentially French name. The letterhead for the same store in 1916 shows the renaming that occurred once the war started. The Kaufhaus Louvre became Kaufhaus Hoher Steg, a name derived from the business' street address. Along with the name change these letterheads show a shifting aesthetic, as the font became the Gothic style of German.

The efforts to eliminate the French elements of Alsatian culture served to increase tensions between German authorities and native Alsatians. While the renaming of stores and magazines was relatively innocuous, the enforcement of restrictions in the use of French led to detentions and denunciations that contributed to Alsatian resentment against German rule. As early as October 1914, the Alsatian artist Charles Spindler wrote in his journal:

Par suite de toutes les mesures vexatoires qu'on leur impose, . . . les Alsaciens n'ont qu'un désir, c'est de voir les Allemands battus et humiliés. Ces derniers ont réussi, grâce à leur dictature, à annihiler ce que quarante-quatre ans d'administration civile avaient fait pour le rapprochement, et c'est en neuf semaines qu'on a obtenu ce magnifique résultat!¹²

The suppression of the French language was indicative of the intolerance of Germans for Alsatian culture. The war led to an environment in which the tensions between the Germans and Alsatians escalated into open conflict.

A second major department store slated to open in Strasbourg in 1914 was originally known alternately as the Kaufhaus Modern or the Magasins Modernes. Unlike the older Kaufhaus Louvre, which had grown incrementally as several neighboring storefronts were subsumed into a larger single store, the Kaufhaus Modern was designed from scratch as a single coherent building. An advertisement from 1913 and the elevation from the building's architectural rendering show the modern appeal of this new edifice.¹³ However, the outbreak of war prevented the store's grand opening, and instead the building was used as a warehouse for grain during the war years. The transformation of this department store, which symbolized modernity in urban design, into a storehouse for war materials is a fitting encapsulation of the tragic perversion of the First World War, wherein innovations of modern life were twisted into tools of destruction.

While the war effort took men away from jobs in rural Alsace, it provided opportunities for women in Strasbourg. By late September 1914, the Chamber of Commerce in Strasbourg established a municipal sewing studio, which employed women and girls to sew clothing and goods for the front.¹⁴ The operation had the dual purpose of producing needed supplies for the military and providing employment for women whose husbands were on the front. The workshop was set up in a large hall that was outfitted with an array of electrical machines including sewing machines, irons, buttonhole machines and cutting machines. The workers made an array of products including bread bags, handkerchiefs, towels, neckties, helmet covers, tents, puttees, shirts, pants, and jackets. The wartime pressures led the municipal government to become involved in the industrial production of clothing,

much to the protests of private enterprise who viewed this as competition. The government workshop took advantage of technological and organizational advancements to implement the sorts of high-volume production that were still not widespread in the region.

Despite the organization of these sewing workshops, the Germans suffered from a persistent lack of material goods. Much of the hardship that Alsatians faced under German rule during the war years was due to shortages. The German government in Alsace imposed rationing on civilian clothing which was overseen by an agency established to control clothing, the *Reichsbekleidungsstelle*. The agency demanded suppliers take careful inventories of their stocks and placed limits on purchasing and pricing of clothing for civilians.¹⁵ By 1918, shortages had become so severe that the government could not find supplies to clothe workers in industries critical to the war effort. A call went out for civilians to donate their used clothing to meet the needs.¹⁶ The German government also published posters that urged German citizens to donate their old clothing, uniforms and shoes. While the discourse at the beginning of the war focused on promoting the German fashion industry as a means of combating the admiration for French fashion, ultimately the reality of war made producing adequate supplies of clothing a matter of critical importance.

German interests in Alsace focused on clothing as a segment of the economy and as a good that was essential to the war effort. Germans concentrated on the political symbolism of fashionable dress to demonstrate their modernity and independence from French influence. Paradoxically, the French took a very different tack regarding clothing in Alsace by focusing on traditional dress. The use of the Alsatian woman or *Alsacienne* as an allegorical representation of the region put a face on the complicated political motivations for French participation in the First World War. Rather than abstract concepts such as self-determination and balance of power, the French were fighting to free the *Alsacienne* from her German captors and return her to the nation she loved.

One of the defining works which first established the model for French depictions of Alsatian women was the painter Jean-Jacques Henner's (1829–1905) 1871 piece *L'Alsace. Elle Attend*.¹⁷ This painting shows a woman dressed all in black with a black headbow which has a small cockade affixed to it. The figure in mourning symbolizes the grief that Alsace felt at the break with France and the vigil she would keep until being returned to France. Henner was a native of Alsace, but he studied art in Paris, where he stayed after 1871, when he opted to remain French. Although the Alsatian woman in the painting wears the traditional *coiffe* and a black shawl, the dress she wears is actually closely in line with fashionable dress of the period. This painting established the headdress as the defining element that was sufficient to communicate Alsatianness. The addition of the cockade on the headbow became a typical element in the pro-French imagery. Although it had no part in Alsatian traditional dress, the cockade would later be adopted by Alsatian women when they wore the costume in political rallies.

Another Alsatian artist whose work helped shape the French understanding of both Alsace's traditional dress and its loyalty to France was Jean-Jacques Waltz (1873–1951), better known by his

Alsatian nickname “Hansi.” Hansi was deeply anti-German and his work focused both on celebrating Alsace and on caricaturing Germans. In contrast to his treatment of Germans whom he depicted as unattractive, unfashionable, and humorless, he idealized the Alsatians who were portrayed as simple and pure (Figure 7.2). His work became popular in France following the publication of his satirical piece, *Professeur Knatschké* (1912), which also resulted in his arrest and imprisonment by German authorities. Much of Hansi’s work was aimed at children, and he featured children wearing traditional dress as the central characters in his books. This extremely youthful *Alsacienne* emphasized the innocence and sweetness of Alsace.

While Alsatian artists such as Henner and Hansi were important in first incorporating traditional dress into images conveying political meaning, French artists continued to make use of the costume for their propaganda, often with far less regard for the resemblance to traditional dress practices. Countless postcards were produced immediately before and during the war and they depicted women dressed in Alsatian traditional dress.¹⁸ It is clear that these photographs were of models dressed according to a French understanding of Alsatian traditional dress. The bow, which was the identifying feature of the costume, took on a variety of shapes that differed significantly from the Alsatian

Figure 7.2 *Hansi, Pages d'Album, c. 1915, Gravure no. 53/150. Musée Hansi, Colmar.*

originals. Many of these bows actually looked more like fashionable hats of the period than like Alsatian *coiffes*. The entire costumes in these images also took on a generically dirndl-like aspect rather than the style characteristic of Alsace. The very slim lines of some of these images strongly suggest that the models were wearing corsets. The resulting images corresponded more closely to fashionable ideals of the female form than the actual rural styles, which largely obscured the waist. In reshaping traditional styles into a sort of folk costume, the artists erased many of the aspects that made rural costumes appear foreign and rustic. The resulting styles were instead appealing and quaint.

By the 1910s, motion pictures provided another vehicle to carry propagandistic messages. In 1916, the French actress Réjane (Gabrielle Charlotte Réju, 1856–1920) pushed for the production of the film, *Alsace*, based on a play by the same name.¹⁹ The plot centers on an Alsatian family loyal to France whose son marries the daughter of a German family who has immigrated to the region. The ultimate tragic death of the son occurs as a result of his loyalty to France. The mother, played by Réjane, is the incarnation of Alsace. She wears a theatrical costume intended to represent traditional dress, including the headbow. The costume in this instance, like those in other propaganda images, serves to connect the character to the region although the actress was Parisian and not Alsatian. Réjane's character has a climactic scene in which she sings a stirring rendition of *La Marseillaise*. This musical scene that appears in the movie poster closely echoes a common trope in propaganda posters that shows Alsatian women draped in the French flag (Figure 7.3).²⁰ The singing of the French national anthem was a particularly poignant act for Alsations because the song had been composed in Strasbourg and attested to the important place Alsace held in French history.

The circulation of the postcards, movies and posters introduced the people of France to Alsace although most would not have had any direct contact with Alsations. They would not have heard the Alsatian dialect, which was a form of German. The depictions did not emphasize the Alsatian cuisine with its sausage and sauerkraut or the architecture with the half-timbered houses so similar to German homes. Even more significantly the propaganda completely ignored the thousands of Alsatian men who wore the German uniform and fought for the Kaiser. The use of traditional dress as a symbolic representation of the region depended almost exclusively on the image of women. The resulting vision of Alsatianness was distinct enough to be recognizable but restricted to a framework that was palatable to the French public.

In her book on women in Alsace, Elizabeth Vlossak points out that the uses of the allegorical image played upon ideas of women's vulnerability and victimhood.²¹ French propaganda from the First World War epitomized this characterization of Alsace as in need of protection and saving. The images generally diverged between those in which she is a beautiful woman and those in which she is an innocent young girl. The first type was very common in postcards and played upon a theme of romantic love. The military battle to reunite Alsace with France was reframed as a love story and many of these depictions established the allegory by showing Alsace as a young woman and France as a

Figure 7.3 *Leven and Lemonier, Alsace interprété par Mme Réjane, 1916. Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire, Strasbourg, NIM18426.*

soldier. The postcards themselves were widely used as a means of communication between soldiers and their loved ones at home, thus serving as tangible tokens of love. The reimagining of the entire war itself as a romantic struggle for the heart of Alsace was a fitting theme for these postcards.

Depictions of the *Alsacienne* as a young girl generally began with the artwork of Hansi, but continued throughout the First World War and after. The focus on women and children in these allegorical scenes allowed evocations of Alsace in ways that rendered it safe. For France the danger of a strong regional identity for Alsace was the development of a separatist movement. At the end of the First World War, there actually was a strong risk of Alsatians fighting for independence rather than reunion with France. The cultivation of a distinctive Alsatian character thus had to be carefully balanced to ensure that it remained subordinate to the French nation.

Rather than a powerful symbol of independence, the *Alsacienne* was powerless and dependent. Both the portrayals of *Alsaciennes* as women and as young girls objectified them. In the case of the romantic heroines, they became a prize to be claimed by the French soldier. As for young girls, they were turned into dolls and given to French children. Such dolls dressed in regional dress date back to

at least the mid-nineteenth century and became popular as souvenirs for tourists and collectible items for children. The dolls themselves even became the subject of propaganda posters such as one published by the Union Amicale d'Alsace Lorraine (Friendly Union of Alsace Lorraine) that encouraged French women to provide poor children with dolls of Alsace and Lorraine. The appeal of the youthful *Alsacienne* was clear as it bore a strong sentimental appeal and created a sympathetic image of Alsace.

Conclusion

The various tropes that were common in these propaganda images also made their way into celebrations at the end of the war. In the weeks following the armistice on November 11, 1918, the French troops moved into Alsace. Their arrival was planned in stages and carefully timed to allow the German forces to leave first. René Chambe, a captain of aviation was among the first wave of French soldiers to arrive in Alsace.²² In describing his entry into the village of Niedernai, he recounted:

Beaucoup de femmes ont revêtu le costume d'Alsacienne, sur leurs cheveux blonds le grand noeud noir. Pour la première fois depuis quarante-huit ans il s'étoile de la cocarde tricolore. C'est la vision de notre enfance, de notre adolescence, qui se réalise et s'anime sous nos yeux. Nous entrons tout vivants dans le rêve.²³

While the welcome that Chambe received was spontaneous and unplanned, the festivities in Strasbourg were intentionally orchestrated to fit the French perception of Alsace that had been constructed in large part through postcards and posters. The arrival of troops into the regional capital was scheduled for November 22, 1918, allowing the city time to prepare the parade. A reception committee was formed with Auguste Braun as its secretary. Braun described the heated discussions that centered on whether young women dressed in traditional dress would be allowed to participate in the parades. Those who opposed the idea believed that it would be like a carnival; they argued that allowing girls from the city to dress up as peasants would be a "masquerade."²⁴ Ultimately the majority voted in favor of allowing costumes, and notices were posted throughout Strasbourg inviting young women interested in participating in costume to meet two days before the celebrations in order to receive instructions from the organizing committee. The notice, written in both French and Alsatian, further specified that the women had to be truly Alsatian and over the age of 16.²⁵ An estimated 800 Alsatian women showed up for the meeting, which ended with one particularly patriotic woman leading the crowd in singing "La Marseillaise."²⁶

The scenes from the parade in Strasbourg were not only captured in photographs but were also filmed. The film footage shows women both parading along with the French soldiers and posing with

them.²⁷ The costumes that these women wore revealed some modifications from the traditional costumes worn by rural villagers, particularly in the addition of the tricolor cockades. Like the French models in the postcards, these women would not have worn these costumes for any other occasion than this performance. The *mise en scène* of the victory parades was an enactment of the allegory in which Alsace receives her savior, France.

The forms of celebrations that marked the French victory were thus a direct result of a French interpretation of Alsatian culture. Such scenes would not have been enacted had Germany been victorious in part because of the different relationship established between German political power and Alsatian regional culture. Because Germany had long since consolidated political control of the region, Alsace did not evoke a powerful feeling of nostalgia and longing in the German imagination. As for the French, they were able to cultivate a favorable view of Alsatian distinctions as epitomized by the traditional dress because they did not have to deal with the frictions of accommodating Alsations into their political system. In contrast, Germans were more concerned with the logistics of governing the region, which led to efforts to stamp out the lingering influence of French culture. Administering the border region where French culture still maintained a strong hold was made even more challenging by the difficulties that Germany was having as it suffered shortages in material and manpower as the First World War dragged on. The very effective use that the French made of Alsatian traditional dress in their propaganda did not have a parallel in German propaganda. Because Germany maintained political control of Alsace, the region did not serve as a rallying point for their soldiers and civilians. In fact, the Germans showed dangerously little regard for gaining or maintaining Alsatian loyalty. While the end of the war would have occurred as a welcome relief to the Alsations regardless of the victor, the jubilant festivities that greeted the arrival of French troops into the region were a product both of French propaganda efforts and hardships faced under German rule during the war.

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