Corpses of atonement: the discovery, commemoration and reinterment of eleven Alsatian victims of Nazi terror, 1947–52

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The retreating of Nazi armies in 1944 corresponded to a final wave of brutality against the occupied populations of Europe.¹ In France, the final maelstrom of destructive violence witnessed atrocities such as the indiscriminate slaughter of villagers in the French town of Oradour-sur-Glane alongside more focused incidents of arrests, deportations and executions.² Thousands of families were left in agonising uncertainty over the fate of targeted loved ones. A number of such cases found their tragic closure in April 1947 when, after an extended investigation that spanned the Franco-German border, the bodies of eleven Alsations were discovered outside the small community of Rammersweier, Baden. The victims had been murdered in the waning months of the Second World War by members of the Offenburg Gestapo.³ The corpses were exhumed and publicly reburied in the days following the discovery. A memorial at the execution site where the bodies were found and another roadside monument were constructed for the victims later that autumn. The connection between Rammersweier and the commemoration of the murdered Alsations would again become a matter of international importance in 1951 after one of the monuments was desecrated. Undeniably, the Alsations' deaths were a tragedy, particularly for their families and their home region of Thann. Yet a lingering question for historians is why these eleven men received such commemorative attention at a time when Europe as a whole was still coming to grips with its millions of dead, 40,000 of whom

were young Alsace-Lorrainers who had died as forced recruits in the *Wehrmacht* and SS.⁴

Alsace was a key geographic centrepiece in the Franco-German rivalry that spanned the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. In 1871, 1914 and 1940–44 France and Germany turned the province into a battlefield in a literal military sense during times of war and an ideological battleground of competing national narratives during times of peace. The results of the three different conflicts saw Alsace change sovereignty four times between 1871 and 1945. Each transition was accompanied by an effort on the part of the victorious nation to (re)integrate the province and its population into the larger German or French nation. Official definitions of ‘true’ and ‘desirable’ Alsatians became increasingly exclusive with each transfer. The period of Nazi control of Alsace from 1940 to 1944 was especially traumatic. Although the province technically remained under French sovereignty after the June 1940 Armistice, in practice Nazi authorities assumed control and commenced the most thorough and brutal restructuring of the Alsatian populace to date. The campaign to cleanse Alsace of ‘undesirable’ racial and national elements was characterised by widespread expulsions and deportations. In addition, Gauleiter Robert Wagner introduced obligatory military service to the province in an effort to further speed the reconciliation and incorporation of Alsatians into the Third Reich in August 1942. Many young Alsatian men chose to flee rather than be conscripted into the *Wehrmacht* or SS. Regardless of the outcome of the individual’s endeavour, the consequences for a failed or successful evasion were severe. Captured conscription ‘shirkers’ were subject to capital punishment, while the punishment for young men who succeeded in evading Nazi authorities fell on their family members who remained in Alsace. In the latter case, anyone residing in the immediate household of a draft evader was liable to have their property confiscated, be deported to the east or interior of Germany, or imprisoned.⁵ It was just such a chain of events that culminated in the killing of the eleven Alsatians whose bodies were found outside Rammersweier in 1947.

This chapter argues that the meticulous attention to the remembrance activities surrounding the reburial and memorialisation of the Alsatians and the intensity of the vandalism investigation demonstrates that French and Badenese officials were convinced that the local responses contained a symbolic resonance beyond giving eleven more victims of Nazi terror a proper burial. In effect, contemporary Badenese authorities and their French counterparts came

to view the dead bodies as representative of the larger crimes of the Nazi regime, particularly those perpetrated against the population of Alsace. The popular participation of the local Badenese populace in the ceremonies honouring the murdered Alsatians was perceived to be an act of moral atonement for the crimes of the National Socialist period. Germans' involvement in the commemorative acts of atonement was meant to demonstrate to the French occupation forces and the wider international community their remorse for and rejection of the recent Nazi past. This difference was reinforced by the respectful handling, reburial and ultimate transfer of the cadavers back to their home village of Thann.

The bodies of the eleven Alsatians and the events surrounding their commemoration also stimulated discussions of larger issues such as patriotic constructions of memory, the achievability of a lasting peace in the historic rivalry between France and Germany and the possibility of European unity. The perpetrators' motives and the impetus behind the Alsatians' actions that had attracted the attention of the Gestapo were lingering questions throughout the commemorative ceremonies. Fundamentally, the tension centred on the incompatible images of the Alsatians as victims of retaliatory Nazi violence or as resisters to Nazi occupation. On the German side, the Alsatians' victimisation was emphasised. The men were described as 'family fathers' who had been executed for helping their sons evade German military conscription. French sources, on the other hand, described the Alsatians as members of the *Maquis* (Resistance fighters) and connected their sacrifice to the general French effort to expel the Nazis from France.⁶ This distinction had the potential to affect the German and French populations' reaction to the corpses. Despite their rejection of the murders, Germans after 1945 remained reluctant to honour 'guerrillas', while the status of 'victim' did not further the construction of a heroic post-war French patriotic memory. At a time that was witnessing an increased emphasis on European cooperation, the conflict between these two interpretations of the Alsatians' motivations had international ramifications. German non-participation in the ceremonies had the potential to alienate the French, who remained sceptical of German remorse, and so disrupt the process of Franco-German reconciliation.

The meaning of the German word, *Wiedergutmachung*, encompasses a wide range of acts that at their root express a desire to provide indemnification for loss. In the context of post-1945 West Germany, the term is associated with the government's reparations to the victims of National Socialism.⁷ Consequently, the starting point

of much of the existent historiography focusing on West Germans' post-war efforts to come to grips with the legacies of National Socialism is when Chancellor Konrad Adenauer first signalled his government's willingness to compensate Jewish victims.⁸ On 27 September 1951, Adenauer announced, 'In the name of the German people, however, unspeakable crimes were committed which require moral and material restitution [*Wiedergutmachung*]'.⁹ This readiness to offer financial restitution to the Jewish survivors of the genocide was codified by the Luxembourg Agreement with Israel in 1952. In a gesture of goodwill and in an effort to reconcile themselves with their Western European neighbours, the West German government would also subsequently extend *Wiedergutmachung* legislation to non-Jewish targets of Nazi persecution that had been persecuted for their race, religion or opinion.¹⁰

Cumulatively, by focusing on the actions of local and state officials in Baden and their interactions with occupational authorities in the French zone and an instance of a pre-Adenauer non-material-based moral atonement for the Nazi past, this chapter contributes to the historiography that has primarily focused on the American and Soviet zones, the high national politics of Adenauer's *Vergangenheitspolitik*,¹¹ the economic and social reconstruction of West German society and the financial restitution to victims of Nazism.¹² It seeks to move beyond the bureaucracy of the denazification panels to examine how Badenese officials attempted to demonstrate the local German populace's collective remorse and disassociate them from the 'handful of perpetrators'. When referring to *Wiedergutmachung* in the context of the commemorative ceremonies surrounding the eleven murdered Alsatians, local Badenese officials and newspapers were speaking not of financial or material reimbursement, but rather recompense or, as I have translated it, 'atonement' at a moral and spiritual level that entailed a clearly visible and – most importantly – a popularly acted out demonstration of remorse and rejection of the recent Nazi past.

Rammersweier was located in the French zone of occupation following the Second World War. French authorities' plan for their sector adhered to a threefold policy. This strategy consisted of obtaining guarantees for the future security of France, procuring German financial and material resources and, finally, 'denazifying' their sector through a process of cultural and political re-education.¹³ Measuring the progress of material restitution was straightforward in the sense that French officials could refer to quantifiable data. Tangible markers of the progress of re-education were more difficult to identify. It is

in this latter context that the ceremonies surrounding the discovery and memorialisation of the eleven Alsations became so significant. For French authorities, the discovery and display of the atrocity provided an educational opportunity to remind the local German populace of the brutality and inhumanity of the Nazi regime.

Badenese authorities similarly recognised the importance and potential symbolic value of the local populace's participation in the commemorative ceremonies. The discovery of the eleven bodies on 5 May 1947 coincided with a critical moment in the re-establishment of German self-government in the French Occupation zone.¹⁴ The first elections for a post-war state legislature in Baden were scheduled for 18 May. The reinterment ritual, therefore, represented a venue in which the local German populace could publicly separate themselves from the perpetrators and so prove to the French their readiness to assume greater governance responsibilities. In this sense, the potential political gain that local Germans could achieve by participating in these acts of moral atonement resembles the instrumental usage of the financial and material elements of *Wiedergutmachung*.¹⁵ We should not assume that German involvement in post-war indemnification efforts was solely driven by calculated self-interest and lacking in true regret. Popular participation in the reinterment and memorialisation ceremonies could also be interpreted as evidence of the advance of the 'collective learning process' in the post-war democratic re-education program.¹⁶ It is undeniable, however, that Badenese officials saw popular involvement in the reburial, memorialisation and later response to the monument's vandalism as an opportunity to gain favour and political capital in the eyes of French officials by exhibiting the progress and success of 'denazification'.

Discovery, exhumation and the commemorative reinterment of the bodies

On 6 May 1947, the local *Ortenauer Zeitung* carried one of the first articles reporting the discovery of the Alsations' bodies under the headline, 'Gestapo Act of Murder Near Rammersweier'. The piece did not spare any details in the descriptions of the Alsations' deaths. The author described how the victims were led barefoot with their hands tied behind their backs from the prison in Offenburg to idling trucks, concealed under a tarpaulin and driven to the place of execution. On a deserted, bombed-out section of the military drill ground outside Rammersweier, the men were further beaten

and finally executed with a shot to the neck. Their bodies were unceremoniously tossed into one of the many nearby bomb craters and covered with a thin layer of earth. The newspaper's highlighting of the chillingly calculated efficiency of the killings was emphasised by the observation that the murderers paused long enough just prior to the executions to strip naked the condemned men and afterwards donated their clothes to the local National Socialist People's Welfare organisation (NSV) clothing drive.¹⁷

A close study of the article reveals two themes with which this chapter is concerned. First, it underscored the brutality of the Alsations' imprisonment and execution by describing them in painstaking detail.¹⁸ The gory and heart-rending details of the article and its emphasis that the executed Alsations had never been given any semblance of due process were intended to unite the reading audience in a feeling of shared horror, a position that was by default 'outside' and 'different' from the Nazis who had committed the acts and more akin to those of the occupying Allied forces. The article affirmed readers' belonging to a community that was united in revulsion at and mourning of the brutal act, rather than complicit in it, by observing that 'an immeasurable sorrow and heartfelt sympathy fills us. An indescribable horror and unanimous rage has seized us. An abhorrence of these heinous murders grips us all. And we wish nothing more, than that the perpetrators and their equally despicable accomplices find their earned punishment.'¹⁹ A second element of the article that separated the contemporary local populace from the crimes of National Socialism was the ambiguity surrounding the culprits' identities. The perpetrators in the story were not identified as 'German' per se, but as the monolithic (and so primarily faceless and unidentifiable) 'Gestapo'. Two exceptions to this observation were the identification and accusations of responsibility directed at the one-time Gauleiter of Alsace, Robert Wagner, and Offenburg's Gestapo Chief, Erwin Schöner. Wagner was denounced for ordering the executions, while Schöner had overseen the killings. The singling out of these two men fit into the larger post-war German narrative that suggested that the crimes of the Second World War were ordered by a small faction of fanatical Nazis.²⁰ Yet even if it was a zealous minority that was responsible for the wartime crimes of the regime, it was the majority of Germans in the post-war period who would need to demonstrate their remorse for and rejection of the illegalities committed in their name. The article closed by calling upon the readership to participate in the upcoming commemorative events planned for the reinterment of the eleven Alsations by

arguing, 'We want as an entire people to singularly honor the dead, join with the bereaved, and so publically show our unshakable desire for atonement.'²¹

The ceremonies surrounding the exhumation of the Alsatians' bodies and their reburial reflected elements of the changing contemporaneous political transition in Baden. On the surface there might appear to exist a significant difference in importance between Baden's first state elections and the call to articulate and enact remorse for the National Socialist atrocity against the eleven Alsatians. Yet at their root, both events reflected the common urge to move post-war Germans from the status of bystanders to that of participants, which marked a significant break with post-1945 precedents. Following the defeat in the Second World War, Germans had been reduced to passive observers of their fate rather than their accustomed role of active protagonists.²² This was most evident in the post-war division of Germany and loss of sovereignty that accompanied the Allies' occupation. However, another context in which this changed status was observable was in Germans' 'first' exposure to the mass crimes of National Socialism, whether as spectators forced to view the horrors of the newly liberated concentration camps or as reluctant assistants in the clean-up efforts.²³ In the case of the murdered Alsatians, this earlier policy was reflected in the order from the representative of the military government in Baden, District Deputy Marc Robert, that 'old Nazis' from Rammersweier and Zell-Weierbach stand watch over the grave until the process of exhumation and transport of the corpses was completed,²⁴ thereby once again confronting those most loyal to the former regime with its crimes. A local carpenter who did finishing work on caskets was ordered to attend the exhumation and place the bodies of the eleven Alsatians in individual coffins. The carpenter's son recalled that he had followed his father out of curiosity and watched as the bodies were exhumed from the bomb crater. He related that 'The bodies were jet black and reeked awfully. My father had to hold his nose. The attendant doctor smoked a thick cigar.'²⁵ A group of local children had gathered to watch the proceedings, only to be chased off by attendant French soldiers. It is also evident that at some point pictures were taken of the bodies and later shown to the men's families – perhaps in an attempt to identify them.²⁶

Two aspects of this scene are especially significant. First, French authorities' decision to place the cadavers in individual coffins unambiguously reversed the Gestapo killers' treatment of the bodies. The Alsatians' corpses had been made anonymous in death, their murderers stripping them of everything – down to the very clothes off

their backs. In contrast, the 1947 exhumation and subsequent commemorations highlighted that the men had died as a group for the singular cause of the liberation of France, but restored their humanity and recognised them as individuals by naming them and providing separate coffins. Second, the French soldiers chasing off curious local children suggests that although French authorities thought it essential that the Alsatians' bodies be seen and acknowledged by the entirety of the local populace, it was important that the corpses be displayed in a particular way.

The 'appropriate' form of observing and commemorating the dead Alsatians was established over the following days in Offenburg. Robert instructed local German District Administrator Dr Joachim that after being exhumed and coffined, the corpses were to be transferred to a school gymnasium that had been specially cleaned and decorated for the occasion and in which the remains would lie in state. Four local civilian 'honour guards' (*Ehrenwache*) were to hold a continual day and night vigil over the coffins. Joachim was instructed to ensure that the wake was accomplished with the greatest propriety, punctuality and with an 'appropriate attitude'. Robert ordered the District Administrator to impress upon the local people the importance of the ceremony, saying, 'You are to call upon the population to join this proof of public atonement.'²⁷ This charge to actively participate in the commemorations marked a significant shift from the passive roles that Germans had been assigned since 1945. Germans were no longer to be passive observers or the forced custodians of Nazi crimes. Both of these roles reflected an indictment of the entire German people's collective guilt. Instead, the active participation and volunteerism of Germans as mourners in the ceremonies honouring the murdered Alsatians was to demonstrate their separation and difference from the perpetrators.

Establishing the distinction between the Nazi perpetrator of the past and the West German democratic mourner of the present was of critical importance in the overall goal of returning the powers of self-determination to the West German population. For that reason, the proactive role of the Badenese population in the commemoration of the victims of National Socialism and the *Landtag* elections were intimately connected. Critically, however, the disproportionate power relationship between French military authorities and the local Badenese community in Rammersweier/Offenburg continued to exist in 1947. Consequently, in both cases Germans' ability to effect significant political change or direct the remembrance activities could go only as far as French occupation officials would allow. Nonetheless,

despite these limitations, historians have identified the *Landtag* elections as marking an important step in the revival of democratic life in West Germany.²⁸ There is a parallel in the realm of commemoration between the activities surrounding the exhumation and reburial of the eleven Alsatians and the gradual re-emergence of West German self-governance. Just as the latter was a step in the direction of a return to German self-representation without French authorities immediately conceding overall political control, so too was the former a move towards allowing Germans the power over the way they remembered their Nazi past without surrendering full influence over remembrance activities in the present. In this sense, it is not surprising that French authorities would relate their expectations, as well as the 'proper' way to mourn the dead Alsatians and leave the details of mobilising the local population to Badenese officials.²⁹ Thus the popular participation in the commemorative activities for the dead Alsatians that preceded the elections was an important opportunity for the communities of Rammersweier and Offenburg to show French authorities their readiness for greater self-governance responsibilities.

Joachim closely followed Robert's instructions. The corpses of the eleven Alsatians lay in state in Offenburg for three days. On 8 May, an honour guard of French occupation soldiers stood to attention outside the gymnasium that had acted as a 'hall of honour' for the Alsatians. Inside, the coffins were shrouded in wreaths and flowers. A wide range of state, district and city authorities, church officials, union representatives, delegates from all four political parties and local schoolchildren attended the ceremony and took turns filing by the caskets. Once this honorary act was completed, a funeral procession slowly bore the coffins to the Trinity Church in Offenburg. The caskets were placed in front of an altar that had been erected outside the church's main entrance. After a bi-denominational ceremony, the coffins were taken up once more in the funeral procession and conveyed to the local cemetery. Later that autumn, the bodies would be exhumed once more and transported to their final resting place in Thann, Alsace.³⁰

Memorialising the atrocity and commemorating the dead

The dedication of two memorials for the Alsatians occurred on 10 November 1947. Local authorities' desire to draw as large a crowd as possible is evident in a draft copy of the official invitation to the

dedication ceremony. The note had originally been addressed solely to the 'Members of the District Assembly'. This circumscribed number of recipients was broadened with a stroke of red pencil and a single word when a subsequent reader crossed out the first addressees and wrote 'everyone' (*alle*) in its place.³¹ The commemorative rites were attended by a large delegation from Thann, while the German District Administrator and various members of the town council were also present. Mayor Zuessy of Thann spoke at the memorial dedication. A German memorandum described the speech as 'natural, intelligent, and reconciliatory'.³² Unfortunately, I have been unable to locate the full text of the dedication. An approximation is available in the form of an earlier 1946 oration that dedicated a monument to the memory of four Frenchwomen who had been murdered nearby by the Gestapo. The similarity of the speeches is also suggested by Robert's instruction to Joachim that the Alsatians' cenotaphs and their inscriptions must be comparable to the Frenchwomen's monument.³³ Today the implementation of this order is evident in the striking resemblance of the monuments' forms.

The service for the slain Frenchwomen was opened in 1946 by Colonel Huchon, the District Representative of the military government in Offenburg. Huchon stated that the memorial was to be a monument of respect and atonement.³⁴ He observed, 'Gentlemen, the lesson of our combined presence this evening should and cannot be a lesson of hate, rather a lesson of conscientious contrition, of pious atonement, and of honest good will for the future.'³⁵ The text of the dedication speech makes it clear that acknowledging the deaths of the Frenchwomen was only one of several purposes that lay behind the construction of the memorial. In a similar vein to that discussed earlier in the *Ortenauer Zeitung*, the monument represented an acknowledgement of Nazi crimes, while the very act of memorialising French citizens on German soil and holding a joint dedication ceremony united both French and German attendees in a community of mourning that served to distance them from the perpetrators. The decision to commemorate the murdered women and men in Germany marked a significant shift in pre-existing memorialisation practices in terms of subject and audience.³⁶ The monuments outside Rammersweier were built to commemorate individuals who had been executed by representatives of the current regime in Germany as enemies of the state. Thus the choice to subsequently honour them marks a dramatic change in the status of the victims and the attitudes of the governing Badenese authorities.³⁷ An additional consideration is that the targets for the symbolic content of memorials are usually

domestic audiences. The Alsations' monuments were intended to permanently remind the local Badenese population of the crime being commemorated. Equally important, however, the monuments were built for the benefit of an international audience and embodied the hope for Franco-German reconciliation in the present and future.

That two memorials were built to commemorate one atrocity reflected the multilayered symbolism and purpose of the Alsations' monuments for Badenese and French authorities. At a practical level, the roadside memorial acted as a marker of the path that led to the execution site monument. More importantly, the prominent location ensured that any passer-by would be reminded of the heinous Nazi deed every time they travelled the road between Offenburg and Durbach. The Gestapo had attempted to hide their crime by committing the murders in an isolated location. Thus a memorial only at the execution site would have been at a remove from regular foot traffic and invisible from the road – thereby inadvertently fulfilling the perpetrators' intention of keeping the evidence of their barbarism concealed. At the same time, the obvious prominence and greater visibility of the roadside monument suggests that it conveyed the message that French authorities most wanted the viewer to associate with the victims and the atrocity. The plaque read, 'Here, on December 6, 1944, eleven members of the Resistance from the region of Thann sealed with their blood the fidelity of Alsace to France'.³⁸ The decision to choose this text for the monument that did not correspond to the actual execution site reveals its political nature. The Alsations were portrayed as martyrs who were murdered as anti-fascist resisters. The memorials served as a stand-in for the actual corpses of the Alsations, whose deaths were portrayed as confirming the depth of their home province's devotion to France. The inscription assimilated the murdered Alsations into the established French nationalist narrative that understood the residents of Alsace to be paradigms of Francophile patriotic virtue.³⁸ The men's names were not recorded on the roadside memorial, suggesting that the information about why and what they died for was more important than who they were. The naming of the eleven men would be left to the execution site monument.

The place of the dead in German and French national memories

Before moving on to a discussion of the subsequent political life of the memorials, it is important to identify a tension in the published

narratives regarding the series of events that found their terrible culmination in the execution of the eleven Alsatians in December 1944. In its earliest article, the *Ortenauer Zeitung* described the murdered men as 'family fathers'. According to the author, the prologue to the executions began when a number of young men from the community of Thann decided to flee to the neighbouring forests in order to avoid forced conscription into the *Wehrmacht* or SS. In response to the young men's failure to report, the Gestapo arrested and deported eleven men, who were finally murdered outside Rammersweier.³⁹ The motivation behind the *Ortenauer Zeitung's* decision to emphasise the arbitrariness and retaliatory nature of the violence and the familial role of the victims is important. The article was published on 6 May 1947, two days prior to the reinterment rites. A primary goal of the piece was to persuade the local populace to turn out in numbers to participate in the commemorative ceremonies. The memories of their own wartime losses of mobilised family members and conscription were still fresh in the minds of the Badenese. A narrative that attributed the Alsatians' violent demise to a paternal desire to protect their children from a soldier's death had greater chance of resonating and eliciting participatory empathy with the local population than if the victims had somehow done something to 'earn' their targeting by the Gestapo.

This initial German description of the eleven Alsatians stands in stark contrast to later Alsatian depictions of the events leading up to the men's arrests. On 11 November 1947, *L'Alsace*, a newspaper from Mulhouse, published what was purported to be the text of the Gestapo report that chronicled the events leading up to the arrest of the eleven Alsatians. The change in the status of the deceased was evident in the very title of the article, which described the Gestapo's discovery of the 'Thann Maquis Camp'. Identifying the Alsatians as members of the Resistance immediately changed their roles from those of passive and chance casualties of Nazi occupation to active protagonists. The Gestapo report described the discovery of a small bunker in the forest north of Thann. In the subsequent firefight one of the bunker's occupants was killed, while two others escaped and a fourth was taken prisoner. Interrogation of the captive uncovered a web of alleged co-conspirators who had assisted in acquiring the small stash of arms in the bunker or provided its occupants with sustenance.⁴⁰ A total of thirty-one men and women from Thann and the surrounding area were arrested in the course of the Gestapo's investigation and deported to Germany. Only eleven of the thirty-one individuals would survive to the war's end and return to Alsace.

Of the remaining twenty deportees, six died from exhaustion in concentration camps and three more were missing, presumed dead. The discovery of the eleven bodies outside Rammersweier had revealed the fate of the remaining members of the Resistance group.⁴¹ The date on which the articles were published, similarly to the earlier article in the *Ortenauer Zeitung*, is significant. The publication of the Gestapo report on 15 November 1947 coincided with the final transfer of the eleven Alsatians' bodies to Thann. The identification of the men as members of the Maquis who were arrested and killed for their Resistance activities against the Nazi occupiers made the returning corpses those of heroic patriotic martyrs rather than victims of arbitrary violence.

The status of tragic protagonist was reinforced with the ceremonies that surrounded the bodies' arrival in Thann. Similarly to the earlier Offenburg commemoration, the eleven coffins lay in state overnight in a local church. There, three other caskets were added to their number. Two contained the bodies of local male deportees who had died in concentration camps, while the third was the corpse of a local man who had been killed fighting with French Forces of the Interior (FFI) against the Germans.⁴² Thus in a material and symbolic sense, the remembrance ceremony linked the deaths and bodies of all fourteen men to the larger effort to liberate France from Nazi oppression. The fourteen coffins were arranged in a semicircle within the chapel and illuminated by three flames. An honour guard made up of representatives from the FFI and local patriotic associations stood to attention over the caskets while the local populace paid their last respects. The next day a church service and funeral procession occurred in the morning and a monument was dedicated in the afternoon. The memorial symbolically and materially articulated the narrative of French solidarity against the Nazi occupation by commemorating all thirty-one members of the Maquis, Resistance and the FFI from the surrounding region of Thann who had died during the Second World War.⁴³ Following the ceremonies the bodies of the Alsatians were returned to their hometowns where they were buried in local cemeteries.

The difference between the two images of the eleven men from Thann reflected the immediate audience and goals of the respective authors. Simultaneously, however, prevalent post-war national narratives also affected and were articulated in the portrayal of the deceased Alsatians. This is particularly true in regard to the image of the Alsatians as Resistance fighters. Liberated Western European states, such as France, invested their post-1945 patriotic memories in

the figure of the Resistance fighter, who provided a heroic narrative of forbearance and bravery that stood in opposition to an otherwise humiliating account of national collapse.⁴⁴ To paraphrase historian Pieter Lagrou, 'being liberated', similarly to being 'arbitrarily' taken hostage and executed, was too weak a basis for the construction of a heroic nationalist history and identity.⁴⁵ The narrative of the valiant Resistance martyr also resonated at a regional level with the post-war population of Alsace. The figure of an active Alsatian protagonist was juxtaposed against the victimised figure of the *malgré-nous* ('against our will'). This latter, self-titled group was composed of young Alsatian men who had been forcibly mobilised into the *Wehrmacht* or SS and fought primarily on the Eastern Front. The figure of the martyred Alsatian Resistance fighter was also attractive because of its apparent unambiguity. Alsations who had been killed on account of their anti-German actions could easily be assimilated into the national narrative that portrayed the population of Alsace as anti-fascist and intransigent French patriots, while the *malgré-nous* for all their insistence of coercion nonetheless remained ambiguous figures in post-war society.⁴⁶ Ultimately, the figure of the victim would displace that of the hero in the popular memory of Alsations' experience in the Second World War.

Vandalism of the memorial and its ramifications

The two monuments in Rammersweier made only sporadic re-entries into the historical record in the years following their dedication. This state of affairs changed overnight in December 1951. The local German populace's relationship with the Alsations' memorials once again came under international scrutiny after one of the monuments was desecrated. Interestingly, the increased focus on the dead men from the Thann region corresponded to another important political development in Baden, similarly to the earlier discovery of the Alsations' bodies around the time of the first *Landtag* elections. On 16 December 1951, the populations of Baden and Württemberg approved an initiative to merge and become the single state of Baden-Württemberg. Two years earlier in 1949, the stage had been set for a gradual increase in West German and local Badenese officials' freedom from outside oversight with the creation of a coordinated Allied High Commission for Germany and the passage of the Basic Law⁴⁷ that provided for the provisional founding of West Germany.⁴⁸ Thus in 1952, the vandalism provided an opportunity for Badenese

authorities to showcase their commitment to democracy. Despite their greater autonomy, local officials would utilise familiar methods to demonstrate both official and popular rejection of the deed.

In discussing the damage to the memorial, local Badenese officials described destroyed flowerbeds, uprooted plants and vases and wreaths thrown into the street and neighbouring fields. Yet the most blatant act of desecration that demonstrated the vandal's premeditation was the dumping of a pile of manure in front of the monument. Even more troubling was the fact that the vandalism occurred in December, on a date that approximated the seven-year anniversary of the Alsatians' executions. The deliberateness of the vandalism caused Badenese authorities to immediately condemn the act as an attempt to sabotage the still fragile Franco-German relationship. On 15 December, an 'atonement ceremony' was held at the restored memorial that was attended by both local and district officials.⁴⁹ German authorities also conducted their investigation with a thoroughness that might otherwise seem disproportionate for an ordinary case of vandalism. Police questioned residents in the surrounding area, checked with their informants, offered a reward of 1,000 DM and went so far as to take a sketch of crime scene footprints to local shoemakers in an effort to uncover any possible leads. In addition to the extensive investigative measures, the police summoned a number of local suspects to check their alibis. These individuals included people who had had confrontations with French occupation authorities or who had reputations of having been 'good National Socialists'.⁵⁰ Despite these efforts, the investigation failed to identify a suspect and was closed on 25 April 1952.

Badenese officials were right to fear the potential international repercussions of the profanation. On 15 December, the mayor of Thann protested to the Governor General in Offenburg. The mayor's letter clearly articulated the Alsatian perspective that the vandalism had larger ramifications beyond the desecration of a monument. He wrote:

The many difficult and painful episodes from the German occupation are still fresh in our minds, Mr. Governor General. It is needless to say that this recent [defiling and degrading of the monument] has painfully surprised not only the families of the victims, but the entire population. At a time when we sometimes only grudgingly support efforts to realize European unity, such an occurrence is doubly painful.⁵¹

In this light, not only did the vandalism evoke raw memories of the occupation of Alsace, it made the residents of Thann sceptical of the

genuineness of West Germans' repentance for their Nazi past, which in turn caused them to question the possibility of Franco-German reconciliation and the project of European unity as a whole. The mayor closed his letter by demanding that the Bonn government restore the monument to its original condition and punish the guilty with the 'utmost severity'. The local media in Baden reported that the mayor had further appealed to French Foreign Minister Robert Schumann to demand that the Federal Republic undertake a thorough investigation and that the culprit be tried before a *French* court. The article closed by saying that the author trusted that the overwhelming majority of Germans were as indignant as the residents of Thann and hoped that the vandal would soon be found and forced to face *German* justice.⁵²

The vandalism and rumours regarding the surrender of German jurisdiction to French courts did not go unremarked from the German side. It was at this moment that the conflicting German description of the eleven Alsatians as 'family fathers' collided with Alsatian portrayals of the men as members of the Maquis. One concerned German citizen, a certain Theodor A., reminded the Federal Minister of Justice in Bonn that 'In the last war the "Maquis" (Resistance Fighters) for the French were "heroes", while for the Germans they were "guerillas"'.⁵³ Establishing the actual motivations of the Alsatians was of critical importance to German officials and went beyond placating a single disgruntled citizen. The distinction between 'Resister' and 'victim' of Nazism meant the difference between compensation and nothing in West German legislation. This differentiation was in large part motivated by the pressure of West German public opinion that, as represented by Theodor A., resented extending benefits to individuals that had or attempted to cowardly murder German soldiers.⁵⁴ Theodor A.'s letter demonstrates that discussions of the 'legitimacy' of certain categories of victims were occurring at the local level contemporaneously with the passage of such legislative distinctions. More broadly it confirms that post-war West Germans were more willing to recognise and demonstrate their remorse towards certain categories of victims than others.⁵⁵

The close observation of German authorities' and the general populace's reaction to the vandalism and investigation demonstrates that popular participation continued to be perceived as an important yardstick for the sincerity of German remorse. Alsatian newspapers like *L'Alsace* were pleased to report to their readers that the profanation had been met with universal condemnation among German officials and the general population.⁵⁶ The article read:

At a time when on our side of the Rhine many painful memories still make us hesitant to establish a good relationship between the German and French people and collaborate to realize European unity, a deed such as the Rammersweier monument desecration cannot help but elicit a justifiable outrage among us. That this action has elicited disgust on the German side and that the authorities and people have unequivocally distanced themselves from the culprit has been noted with satisfaction.⁵⁷

The reaction of the editors demonstrated that the legacy of bitterness from the German occupation continued to persist and could easily be rekindled, but that the clear and public rejection of the deed by the Badenese authorities and the population left the path open to reconciliation in the future. This statement also closely aligns with a statement that Colonel Huchon made at the dedication of the memorial for the four executed Frenchwomen in 1946: 'France, Germany's neighbor and its victim, could one day shake hands with a Germany that painstakingly recognizes its obvious responsibility for the recent past, has indicated its desire to rectify the damage as far as possible and rebuild the war ravaged countries for a future based on humaneness and morality.'⁵⁸

The study of the events and ceremony surrounding the commemoration of the eleven murdered Alsatians and the later search for the monument's vandal provides an opportunity to examine the moral dimension of *Wiedergutmachung* as it was put into practice over the period from 1947 to 1952. An unmistakable cathartic element was present in contemporary Germans' participation in the public acts of atonement surrounding the commemorations of the Alsatians and the later search for the vandal. Unlike the post-war financial and material reparations, whose actual payment would be the concern of a few select West German government officials, the moral atonement for the crimes of the National Socialist period required the participation of the German populace. Each of the remembrance undertakings surrounding the Alsatians' corpses were part of a broader effort undertaken by Badenese authorities to demonstrate the local populace's rejection of the recent Nazi past and rehabilitation at a moral level. Local officials recognised the symbolic importance of the three incidents and believed that the degree of public participation in the commemoration and investigation would be the measure by which foreign opinion judged the sincerity and depth of German popular support for *Wiedergutmachung*.

Beyond providing opportunities to prove separation and remorse, the bodies of the eleven Alsatians also became the focal point and catalyst for larger debates on post-war patriotic constructions of memory, the feasibility of national reconciliation between

France and Germany and ultimately the viability of European unity. In fact, the passage of time and the community of Rammersweiler's continued care of the monuments have facilitated a Franco-German understanding at an individual and communal level. The *Badische Zeitung* described the atmosphere of a joint ceremony involving delegates from Thann and Rammersweiler marking the fiftieth anniversary of the executions in 1994 thus: 'No word of accusation and no word about hatred was spoken, in fact they spoke of reconciliation and friendship'.⁵⁹ The sense of resolution conveyed in this quotation does not suggest a lessening of grief of the victims' families, nor does it come at the expense of whitewashing the past. The shared Franco-German acknowledgement of the Alsatians' murders and survivors' pain has worked to perpetuate the memories of the dead and overcome the hatred that motivated the original atrocity and the legacy of bitterness it left in its wake.

Notes

- 1 See R. Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), especially ch. 3, 'Murder and Mayhem'.
- 2 See S. Farmer, *Martyred Village: Commemorating the 1944 Massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
- 3 The mass grave of the Alsatians was the second of its kind discovered in the area outside Rammersweiler. In December 1945, the bodies of four Frenchwomen who had been executed as members of the French Resistance had been discovered in the neighbouring forest. The women had been killed at the same time, in the same manner and in nearly the same place as the Alsatian men by members of the Offenbourg Gestapo. The form of their memorialisation is a point of commemorative comparison for the Alsatians that will be periodically referenced.
- 4 During the Second World War approximately 130,000 Alsace-Lorrainers were forcibly conscripted or joined the *Wehrmacht* and SS. Most of these individuals were dispersed in units across the Eastern Front. See J. Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 247–8.
- 5 'Verordnung über Massnahmen gegen Wehrpflichtentziehung vom 1. Oktober 1943; *Verordnungsblatt des Chef der Zivilverwaltung im Elsass* Nr. 21, 13 October 1943, R 43 II 1334a, Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde.
- 6 P. Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945–1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Lagrou argues that an exaggerated conception of a society-wide resistance to Nazi occupation was utilised by France and other Western European countries to justify their participation in post-war European and international politics.

- 7 C. Goschler, *Wiedergutmachung: Westdeutschland und die Verfolgten des Nationalsozialismus (1945–1954)* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1992), pp. 12–13.
- 8 For a study of the way in which West German leaders approached the memory of the Nazi past in the years immediately following the Second World War, see J. K. Olick, *In the House of the Hangman: The Agonies of German Defeat, 1943–1949* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
- 9 Quoted in J. Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 282.
- 10 Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation*, pp. 279–80.
- 11 *Vergangenheitspolitik* or ‘politics of the past’ refers to West German political leaders’ approach to the memory and legacies of the recent National Socialist period. Political parties were divided on the issue. The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) led by Konrad Adenauer focused on reintegrating and reconciling former Nazis to the democratic West German government at the expense of confronting Germans’ roles in the Third Reich and justice for its victims. The Social Democratic Party (SPD), on the other hand, led by Kurt Schumacher advocated a direct confrontation with the Nazi past. See Herf, *Divided Memory*, pp. 240–61 and 267–72.
- 12 Jeffrey Herf and Robert G. Moeller examine the combination of moral obligation and self-interest that motivated the West German government’s indemnification efforts. See Herf, *Divided Memory*; R. G. Moeller, ‘Remembering the war in a nation of victims: West German pasts in the 1950s’, in H. Schissler (ed.), *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949–1968* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 83–109. Norbert Frei provides an in-depth examination of the political-legal elements of Adenauer’s ‘politics of the past’ that sought to amnesty and integrate former supporters of National Socialism and separate the now West Germans from their Nazi past. See N. Frei, *Adenauer’s Germany and the Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration* (trans. J. Golb) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Michael L. Hughes studies the manner in which West Germans internally dealt with the political and economic debts and legacies of National Socialism in his investigation of the post-war *Lastenausgleich* (‘balancing out of burdens’) movement. See M. L. Hughes, *Shouldering the Burdens of Defeat: West Germany and the Reconstruction of Social Justice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
- 13 F. R. Willis, *The French in Germany, 1945–1949* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 45–6, 91.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 190–218.
- 15 See Herf, *Divided Memory*; Moeller, ‘Remembering the war in a nation of victims’.
- 16 See K. Jarausch, *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945–1995* (trans. B. Hunziker) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 17 ‘Gestapo Mordtat bei Rammersweier’, *Ortenauer Zeitung*, 6 May 1947. C 15/1 Nr. 497 Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg Staatsarchiv Freiburg (hereafter StA Freiburg).

- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Frei, *Adenauer's Germany and the Nazi Past*, p. 311; see also R. G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Constructing their memory of the National Socialist period in this light allowed West Germans to portray themselves as seduced, 'unwilling' participants who would be made victims over the course of the war and in its aftermath.
- 21 'Gestapo Mordtat bei Rammersweiler', *Ortenauer Zeitung*. C 15/1 Nr. 497, StA Freiburg.
- 22 Bessel, *Germany 1945*, p. 6.
- 23 Olick, *In the House of the Hangman*, pp. 97–8.
- 24 Kreisdelegierte Robert to Landrat von Offenburg Dr. Joachim, 2 May 1947. C 15/1 Nr. 497, StA Freiburg.
- 25 C. Weizenecker, 'Elf elsässische Widerstandskämpfer wurden 1944 in Rammersweiler hingerichtet. Todesschüsse in eisiger Kälte', *Badische Zeitung*, Nr. 168, 23 July 1994. 12 Stadt Offenburg 122–06 Rammersweiler/1, Stadtarchiv Offenburg (hereafter StadtA Offenburg).
- 26 C. Weizenecker, 'Ein "Vaterunser" über die Grenzen hinweg', *Badische Zeitung*, Nr. 283, 8 December 1994. 12 Stadt Offenburg 122–06 Rammersweiler/2, StadtA Offenburg. At least one of the daughters of the murdered men brought this photo of her father's corpse to the on-site ceremony commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the men's executions. The article described the picture as the daughter's only real memory of her father. I have not found any other mention of a post-mortem investigation.
- 27 Robert to Joachim, 2 May 1947. C 15/1 Nr. 497, StA Freiburg.
- 28 Willis, *The French in Germany*, pp. 190–218.
- 29 The archival record does not suggest that the participation of the local inhabitants in the memorial ceremonies was coerced. See 'Gestapo Mordtat bei Rammersweiler', *Ortenauer Zeitung*, 6 May 1947. C 15/1 Nr. 497, StA Freiburg.
- 30 'Die feierliche Beisetzung der Gestapo-Opfer', *Ortenauer Zeitung*, 13 May 1947. 12 Stadt Offenburg 122 Ortsteile, 122–06 Rammersweiler 1, StadtA Offenburg.
- 31 Memorial Invitation, OG-Gen3-464, Kreisarchiv Offenburg (hereafter KA Offenburg).
- 32 Aktennotiz, 10 November 1947. OG-Gen3-464, KA Offenburg.
- 33 Kreisdelegierte Robert to Landrat von Offenburg Dr. Joachim, 12 May 1947. OG-Gen3-464, KA Offenburg.
- 34 'Kurze Inhaltsangabe der Ansprache, welche der Delegierte für den Kreis Offenburg am 19.6.46 bei der Einweihung des Denkmals für die vier Französinen gehalten hat'. OG-Gen3-464, KA Offenburg.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 For a discussion of evolving German memorialisation practices, see M. Lurz, *Kriegerdenkmäler in Deutschland*, vols 1–6 (Heidelberg: Esprint Verlag, 1985–87).
- 37 The satisfaction of French authorities with the local official response is evident in a note sent by Huchon following the dedication. Huchon

spoke directly to the *Landrat* and thanked him for 'the understanding and good will that we have seen in your subordinates and yourself in the edification of this monument of piety and reparation'. It is reasonable to assume that having demonstrated an appropriate willingness to work with French officials in 1946, Badenese authorities would continue their cooperation less than a year later when the bodies of the eleven Alsatians were discovered. See Lieutenant-Colonel Huchon to Monsieur le Landrat d'Offenbourg, 27 June 1946. OG-Gen3-464, KA Offenbourg.

- 38 See L. Boswell, 'From liberation to purge trials in the "mythic provinces": recasting French identities in Alsace and Lorraine, 1918–1920', *French Historical Studies*, 23:1 (2000), 129–62.
- 39 'Gestapo Mordtat bei Rammersweiler', *Ortenauer Zeitung*, 6 May 1947. C 15/1 Nr. 497, StA Freiburg.
- 40 'Die Aufdeckung des Thanner Maquis-Lagers im Spiegel authentischer Gestapo Berichte', *L'Alsace*, 11 November 1947, StadtA Offenbourg; *L'Alsace* was written in German. Although in general Alsatians politically leaned towards France, they culturally and linguistically were oriented towards Germany. For example, in 1918 only 3.8 per cent of the population of the Lower Rhine and 6.1 per cent of the Upper Rhine spoke French. See C. Fischer, *Alsace to the Alsatians?: Visions and Divisions of Alsatian Regionalism, 1870–1939* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), p. 135.
- 41 'Die tragische Bilanz des Maquis in Thann – Alt-Thann. Von 31 Verhafteten sind 17 tot, davon 11 ermordet, 3 vermisst und nur 11 sind ins Heim zurückgekehrt', *L'Alsace* [probably August 1947], StadtA Offenbourg.
- 42 'Die sterblichen Überreste der Maquisards wurden gestern nach Thann überführt', *L'Alsace*, 14 November 1947, StadtA Offenbourg.
- 43 For a discussion of the contested politics of memory in France following the Second World War, see G. Namer, *La commémoration en France de 1945 à nos jours* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1987), especially 'La commémoration', pp. 143–62.
- 44 Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation*, p. 2.
- 45 Ibid., pp. 26, 266.
- 46 See Farmer, *Martyred Village*, especially ch. 5, 'The Bordeaux trial'.
- 47 L. D. Clay, *Decision in Germany* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1950), pp. 421, 436. The Basic Law established a democratic government with an independent judiciary system and guaranteed individual rights and freedoms.
- 48 Ibid., p. 428. An Occupation Statute governed the authority of the Commission. Clay records that 'It [the Occupation Statute] conveyed full legislative, executive, and judicial powers to the federal state and the participating states except in the fields of disarmament and demilitarization; international controls such as the Ruhr authority; foreign affairs; displaced persons; protection, prestige, and security of Allied forces; respect for the Basic Law; control over foreign exchange and over internal actions which would increase external

financial assistance; and control of prisoners confined by the occupying authorities.'

- 49 *L'Alsace*, 15 January 1952. C 20/1 Nr. 680, StA Freiburg. The article related that the ceremony took place 'with the agreement' of the military administration.
- 50 Report from the Oberstaatsanwalt bei dem Landgericht Offenburg to the Bad. Ministerium der Justiz, 28 December 1951. C 20/1 Nr. 680, StA Freiburg.
- 51 Mayor of Thann to the Governor General in Offenburg, 15 December 1951. R.2.016, Centre des Archives diplomatiques de La Courneuve.
- 52 'Protest aus Thann', *Badische Zeitung*, 20 December 1951, Nr. 198. C 20/1 Nr. 680, StA Freiburg.
- 53 Theodor A. to Bundesjustizminister in Bonn, 20 December 1951. C 20/1 Nr. 680, StA Freiburg.
- 54 Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation*, pp. 279–80. Lagrou also observes 'the claim of resistance fighters to be assimilated with soldiers of the regular army, both during and after the war, invalidated all legal claims for reparation payments, since they should in consequence, and despite the particular conditions of their detention, be considered PoWs for whom international law never foresaw reparation.'
- 55 See Goschler, *Wiedergutmachung*.
- 56 *L'Alsace*, 15 January 1952. C 20/1 Nr. 680, StA Freiburg. The article specifically mentioned that the president of South Baden, Leo Wohleb, had personally written to the French *Landeskommissar* Pierre Pène expressing his disgust at the act and that both local state and city officials participated in the rededication 'atonement' ceremony.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 'Kurze Inhaltsangabe der Ansprache, welche der Delegierte für den Kreis Offenburg am 19.6.46 bei der Einweihung des Denkmals für die vier Französischen gehalten hat'. OG-Gen3-464, KA Offenburg.
- 59 'Die Erinnerung schmerzt noch immer: Gedenkfeier auf dem Thalebuckel für elf 1944 ermordete elsässische Widerstandskämpfer', *Badische Zeitung* 284, 8 December 2010. 12 Stadt Offenburg 122 Ortsteile, 122–06 Rammersweiler/2, StadtA Offenburg.

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