Jeune Alsace: A Journal and a Society for Alsatian Youth Readjustment to a “style de vie français,” 1942–1955

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Jeune Alsace was a federation, a youth movement, and a periodical rooted in the Second World War and lasting until 1954. The movement was particularly active during and after the Liberation of Strasbourg in December 1944, even though war was still raging in the rest of France. Thirty-five years later, Charles Dillinger remembers with great fondness the influential role played by Jeune Alsace right after the liberation. He describes the movement's early mission towards Alsatian youth in a few words: "To help them find France again!"¹ Charles Dillinger thought his testimony would be valid only if he explained how Jeune Alsace brought crucial support to his own youth movement: Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne (JOC).² This acknowledgment of Jeune Alsace's impact was quite unexpected. Indeed, Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne was one branch of the Action Catholique de la Jeunesse Française (ACJF), which provided the "dominant model" for youth movements in France in the 1930s.³ On the national level, Action Catholique was the strongest group of youth movements that survived the Vichy regime, and that resumed its activities first after the Liberation. The scholarship on French youth movements argues that Action

Catholique came out of the war stronger and larger than any other movement because it had actively prevented the implementation of a monopolistic youth movement similar to the Hitler Youth in Vichy France. Therefore, ACJF was spared the accusation of collaboration endemic to the postwar period. The Action Catholique youth movements also appeared safer because they were not political movements per se, but represented the many subgroups of the French youth population, such as Agricultural Christian Youth, Workers' Christian Youth, and Student Christian Youth. In other words, Action Catholique rose successfully from the ashes of Vichy and regained its hegemony over the youth movements shortly after the war. So why did Dillinger stress the much needed and appreciated help brought by Jeune Alsace in the reestablishment of the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne in Alsace? In what way does it mean that Alsace was a special case?

To grasp the complexity of this issue, we first need to review the unique fate of Alsatian youth during the Second World War. After France's defeat in June 1940, Alsace was immediately incorporated into the Third Reich—the Bade administrative division (Gau)—whose governor directly responded to the Führer. According to the historian Geneviève Humbert, the Germans did not have a precise plan for what should become of Alsatian youth, and Nazi youth policy was created as the Occupation unfolded. Humbert states that the policy toward youth advocated progressive "seduction" but no abrupt enrollment into the Hitler Youth. Indeed Humbert specifies that

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for the first two months of occupation, Alsatian youth was "invited" to join the German Popular Youth of Alsace after all other existing youth movements had been dissolved. Only in September 1940 did the German Popular Youth of Alsace become the Hitler Youth-Alsace. Leaders needed for the Hitler Youth were sent to Germany to a leadership school (Führerschule), while a barrack in Strasbourg was converted into a local leadership school. The training included physical education, military preparation, and political indoctrination; anti-Bolshevism, and New Order ideology (Neuordnung des deutschen Lebens) were also central to the curriculum. Humbert asserts that the Nazi Hitler Youth leaders were satisfied with the development of the movement in Alsace: according to their records, on 1 January 1941, 10,000 young Alsatians were enrolled in the Hitler Youth and this was a year before membership became compulsory. Hitler Youth participated in the war effort collecting warm clothes for the winter, harvesting medicinal plants, and fixing and making toys for Christmas. Boys aged sixteen and older also learned to use guns and studied war tactics, as well as basic first aid. Humbert underlines the Alsatian resistance to such "nazification," and based on reports made by the secret services (Sicherheitsdienst) in 1944, she argues that "the youth of Alsace was by nature hostile to serving in the Hitler Youth, and this is especially obvious in the villages of Catholic confession." Although documents that show the concern of the German authorities are compelling, Humbert fails to explain the ways in which Alsatian youth resisted "Germanization." She alludes to a "negative attitude" towards the

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7 However, François Igersheim argued that if the membership in the Hitler Youth was not obligatory by law, it was still so in fact. François Igersheim, "Lycéens Alsaciens Sous La Croix Gammée," Revue d’Alsace 121 (1995): 175-271.
"occupier" and mentions other acts of resistance without specifying details. Since the literature on Alsatian youth is thin, it is difficult to establish a hypothesis about Alsatians' resistance to the Nazi control of youth. A few scholars support the argument of Alsatian particularism, that is, there is something unique about Alsatian culture and identity that makes them neither French nor German. This essay rejects such a claim and argues that the existence of the association Jeune Alsace proves that youth policy in Alsace is exceptional mainly because of the specific experience of occupation and annexation by the Nazis, not because of Alsatians' uniqueness of character. This essay also evaluates initiatives and efforts put into the "re-Frenchification" of Alsatian youth in the aftermath of the Second World War.

The association Jeune Alsace was promptly created in January 1945. The founders were exclusively Alsatian men and women, some of whom had been refugees in the southern zone, while others remained in Alsace and experienced direct Nazi control of the region, prompting some to join the maquis (underground). These men and women shared a common profile in two respects: they were deeply attached to their regional identity, and they all had some experience in popular education. The original goal of Jeune Alsace was to generate an organization encompassing the opinions of the many

confessional, political, and otherwise specialized youth movements that existed before the Nazis took over the region. In other words, it aimed to facilitate the restoration of youth movements in Alsace by becoming a unique, regional but French-oriented voice in communication with the French government.\textsuperscript{12} Created in December 1944, another organization—Union Patriotique des Organisations de Jeunesse (UPOJ)—aimed to fulfill a similar role on the national level by becoming a federation of youth movements to provide information and suggestions to the authorities on matters of youth policy.\textsuperscript{13} UPOJ operated unevenly in France. In October 1948 Paul Collowald, a journalist working for \textit{Le Nouvel Alsacien}, wrote a series on the issues facing Alsatian youth. In his sixth article, he described the UPOJ as the descendant of a Resistance organization intended to promote solidarity and support among youth movements. Collowald argued that the UPOJ failed because it naively assumed that political and educational movements could cooperate.\textsuperscript{14} Some Alsatian youth movement leaders gave the benefit of the doubt to the UPOJ initiative, and recommended that their members attend the meetings. But the volume of correspondence about the UPOJ in the prefecture dropped after 1949, showing that the UPOJ, a project of French initiative, was not successfully implemented in Alsace.\textsuperscript{15} By contrast, Jeune Alsace lasted until 1969, although

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\item \textsuperscript{12} Argument reinforced in Holveck, "Historique de Jeune Alsace," quoted in Bouquet, \textit{La politique de la jeunesse}. Jeune Alsace "would be a kind of Youth and Popular Education office that would as much as possible carry on a close and trusting relationship with the State while remaining a private initiative. This office would be a-denominational and apolitical" (xv).
\item \textsuperscript{13} ADBR, 1130W414: "Union Patriotique des Organisations de Jeunesse," 27 December 1944, Mouvements de Jeunesse, UPOJ.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Paul Collowald, "La Jeunesse Alsacienne," 6; "Espoirs et déceptions des organismes de culture populaire," \textit{Le Nouvel Alsacien}, 1 October 1948.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Last documents dealing with the UPOJ: ADBR, 1130W414: Ernest-Florent Holveck,"Strasbourg: Chers Amis," 1 October 1946, Mouvements de Jeunesse, UPOJ.
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its main mission of representing the Alsatian youth movements only endured until 1954.

Overall Jeune Alsace's activities and purposes fluctuated between 1945 and 1954. During the first official meeting, leaders of Jeune Alsace enunciated broad goals for their needs: "Article 2: The organization's goals are: 1) Alsatian youth's participation in the French war effort; especially through civic and moral aid services; 2) aid to youth for their immediate needs; 3) the readjustment of Alsatian youth to a French lifestyle; and 4) moral support for youth movements."\(^{16}\) Such a statement of goals raises intriguing questions. What were Alsatian youth's "immediate needs," and what did they have in mind when they said "moral support"? How did they plan to implement a readjustment to a French lifestyle?

The first question concerned the diagnosis made by the Alsatians about their youth's moral health. The journalist Paul Collowald applied a double standard to Alsatian youth: unlike their elders, they were deemed to be the main agent of material and moral reconstruction, yet they were thought to carry serious moral scars from the Occupation.\(^{17}\) This same duality is discussed in Richard Jobs' analysis of French youth after the Second World War, where he portrayed two kinds of French youth: the *jeunes cadres* (young executives and bureaucrats), who carried the hope of economic reconstruction, and the *délinquants*, who were the victims of the moral instability of the Second World War.\(^{18}\) The jeunes cadres contributed to the "New Wave" phenomenon, and the délinquants justified a policy of reeducation, which "was not only applied to public institutions of *éducation surveillée* [supervised education], but to any


\(^{17}\) Paul Collowald, "La Jeunesse Alsacienne : 1/ Le problème de sa réaction psychologique et culturelle a-t-il été posé en ses véritables termes après la libération?," *Le Nouvel Alsacien*, October 1948.

organization, public or private, that sought to reform the delinquent outside his family milieu." This dichotomy, jeune cadre-délinquant, is not pervasive in Collowald's analysis. Indeed, he insisted that Alsatian youth needed a carefully prepared "psychological moral and cultural readaptation." Collowald offered a detailed description of the multi-faceted harm done to youth during the Occupation, and he stressed how schooling in Alsace during the war caused "intellectual misery" due to "its exclusively political and pragmatic character." He mentioned, for example, how biology and civic education classes were corrupted to display the National Socialist racial ideology. He also explained how, to the children's great satisfaction, afternoons were devoted to sport and to plastic arts to the detriment of core disciplines such as mathematics. Collowald renamed Nazi schooling "collective dressage" in which the children who showed tendencies towards leadership were carefully identified and sent to leadership schools in Germany. Finally, Collowald stated that while fifteen-to-seventeen-year-old young people often resisted indoctrination, ten-to-eleven-year-old children were likely to have suffered serious moral damage. He told the story of an Alsatian refugee who had returned to Alsace for his father's funeral. During this short trip home, the man was both reassured and worried about his nephews' moral development. The boys kept reading and speaking French in spite of the interdiction and purposefully sabotaged their Hitler Youth activities. Still, the man remained concerned that the children were developing skills in deceiving adults. In regard to older adolescents, Collowald deplored their

19 Ibid., 157.

20 Collowald, "La Jeunesse Alsacienne: 1/ Le problème de sa réaction psychologique."

21 Paul Collowald, "La Jeunesse Alsacienne: 2/ Ce que l'on savait et ce que l'on pensait d'elle en Zone non-occupée," Le Nouvel Alsacien., October 1948.

limited general knowledge, their ignorance of good manners, and their lack of personality. Collowald's opinion was reinforced by an article published in the periodical *Jeune Alsace* in May 1946. The author, Louis Bernard, contrasted the characteristics of Alsatian youth before and after the Occupation. He argued that Alsatians used to be hard-working, good students: "Frankness and simplicity were characteristic features of the Alsatian youth's temper . . . Today, a bit of weariness seems to have pervaded the spirit of young people as well as older people." Adults' main concern was that Alsatian youth had lost their moral strength, and this worry remained a core theme of the association and the periodical *Jeune Alsace*.

Beyond establishing a line of communication with the prefect and therefore acting as a representative for the Alsatian youth movements, Jeune Alsace implemented popular education projects, creating a direct link to Strasbourg youth. Their first priority was to create a monthly periodical, entitled *Jeune Alsace*, that aimed to be "the journal of all girls and boys from around here." The tone was meant to be inspiring and to mobilize youthful energy towards reconstruction. Not surprisingly, it often became pure propaganda, worshipping the French army and Resistance heroes and reinforcing the victimization of Alsace. The periodical was exceptional, however, in the extraordinary material resources that were at its disposal. At first, the journal consisted of only six pages, although most of them showed full-size photographs of good quality in spite of paper rationing. It rapidly expanded to a twelve-page publication with an equal number of pictures, but with more elaborate articles. Because there is very little information about the editing and writing of *Jeune Alsace*, we have to trust the oral sources to know how this quality was possible and how widely the journal was read in Alsace. Florent

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Holveck, one of the founders, claims that 30,000 copies were printed for each release, and they were distributed by teachers who used them as reading material when no other French text was available. The publication relied heavily on the help of the First French Army, which liberated Strasbourg and kept Alsace French, because it provided the photographs, the paper, and the ink necessary for printing. The periodical produced a total of thirty-three editions, released over nineteen months from February 1945 to March 1947. But the journal's budget shrank, and it disappeared before the Marshall Plan reached France. With thirty-three editions, Jeune Alsace offered a constant menu of information. The following sample of columns shows that, although the periodical was promoting French language and culture, it wanted its regional audience to identify with the association. A recurring column was "Tribune de Jeune Alsace," which kept track of many activities of the association. "Notre Beau Pays" (Our Beautiful Country) was a guide to knowing the region better. There were also columns that used dialect: "Fier unter d'Hosse" (Pants on Fire) was a column in which the editor could express his discontent with current news, for example, the tardiness of the French government in reestablishing education.

At first, there were also symbolic events organized by Jeune Alsace, such as a trip to Constance in June 1945—Constance being located in the French-occupied zone of Germany—so that Alsatian youth might realize that the French victory was real. This trip was made possible by the military, with support from General de Lattre de Tassigny, who had already provided the association with material for the journal. Florent Holveck noted that two-hundred-and-fifty boys and girls were transported in army trucks to Constance.²⁶ Jeune Alsace also organized long-term projects, including Summer Camps for Reconstruction, a theater club, choral groups, movie clubs, and popular education camps to train youth movement leaders. Once the "immediate

²⁶ Holveck, “Historique de Jeune Alsace” quoted in Bouquet, La politique de la jeunesse, xxiii.
needs" of Alsatian youth were addressed, Jeune Alsace from 1950 to 1954 essentially devoted its energy to popular culture, including movies, theater, radio, and camps. In 1950, Jeune Alsace recorded one thousand members in its movie club, three hundred in the theater club, and one-hundred-and-twenty candidates for popular education training. In 1952, Jeune Alsace bought the Castle of Fréconrupt to host larger summer camps and the ever-popular education camps. While previous years had shown some success for Jeune Alsace's projects, 1954 was a turning point in the association's life: the movie club was dismantled because of lack of funding, and attendance at committee meetings dropped, marking a point where Alsatian youth movements no longer needed a regional association to promote readjustment to France.

In brief, Alsatians, on their own initiative, created Jeune Alsace for their own youth. The movement had two interconnected goals: readjusting Alsatian youth to French society while maintaining a strong regional identity. The archives of this association hold precious information about the perception of a generation of Alsatians regarding how National Socialist ideology and policy changed their youth. They listed among their grievances: standardization of character, corruption of a natural disposition towards honesty and good work habits, and a weakening of intellectual curiosity and general knowledge. However, in spite of the never-ending list of harm done to Alsatian youth, these Alsatians never commented on anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism, core themes of the Nazi ideology. Jeune Alsace was careful to avoid those political debates, whether its members were pro-communist or pro-fascist. Taking a political stand would not help Alsatian youth to grow or to fit into their new nation. Rather than advocating a particular political consciousness, Jeune Alsace organized symbolic events and activities to reinforce a feeling of belonging to France. Through Jeune Alsace, Alsatians found their way home to France while maintaining a vigorous regional identity.