The Story of Franco-Prussian War Heroine Coralie Cahen and the French Red Cross, 1871–1914

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During the early years of France's Third Republic, newspapers and magazines as well as civics textbooks recounted stories of the heroines of the Franco-Prussian war. The valiant actions of telegraph operator Juliette Dodu, franc-tireur Antoinette Lix, and young martyr Suzanne Didier helped reassure French women and girls that they were citizens despite their lack of the vote, and that patriotism and even heroism were as inherent in French women as they were in French men. Bertrand Taithe has argued that the Franco-Prussian War opened another way for French women to declare and practice citizenship: Red Cross nursing.¹ Founded in 1866, the French Red Cross was in its infancy during the war, maturing only in the 1880s. In this period the French Red Cross campaigned to raise money, recruit volunteers, and pressure the French government and army for an official role in the national defense. As Red Cross promoter François de Witt-Guizot told his audience of Catholic women, to volunteer for the Red Cross was to be prepared to serve the military medical service, "that is to say the State, furthermore, that is to say the Fatherland."² But although

there were numerous stories of French women's heroism in nursing the wounded during the Franco-Prussian War, these tales rarely appeared in Red Cross literature. Rather than point to this record of past service, Red Cross publicity tended to belittle its own role in the Franco-Prussian War, pointing out, for example, how much better prepared the German Red Cross had been. It made its case on the grounds of urgent current and future need, rather than building upon stories of French women's recent wartime activities.

In some cases this reticence is entirely understandable. Several of the best-known volunteer nurses in the Franco-Prussian War were not appropriate models for Red Cross volunteers. The most infamous, of course, was Louise Michel, the Red Virgin of the Commune. Almost as well known was the volunteer hospital run by the actresses of the Comédie Française. The Divine Sarah was a far cry from Louise Michel, but scarcely more appropriate as a poster child for the Red Cross. There was, however, Coralie Cahen, whose personal life, like her wartime nursing record, was unimpeachable. Yet she rarely appeared in speeches or publications by Red Cross promoters. Here is her


4 Louis Bourges, Les héroïnes du secours d'autrefois et d'aujourd'hui (Paris: Union des Femmes de France, 1913), 19. Paul and Henry Trailles, Les femmes de France pendant la guerre et les deux sièges de Paris (Paris, 1872), 56, began their chapter on actresses with a defense: "What's this? the prudish folk will cry. 'Is the actress going to have a place in your gallery of beautiful devotion and noble charity! This will no longer be a pantheon but a pandemonium!' We will reply to these well intentioned people that we have no partisan intent but only pursue a patriotic goal."
Franco-Prussian War Heroine

Coralie Cahen was forty-three, the widow of a doctor, when the war broke out in the summer of 1870. According to her own account, she was asked—she does not say by whom—to aid the wounded in Metz. Using equipment of the French Red Cross organization, the Société de secours aux blessés militaires (hereafter SSBM), she organized the retrieval of wounded soldiers from the battlefields and, with the help of other Metz ladies, set up a large hospital to care for them. When Cahen left Metz after the city fell, the SSBM provided her with the material to set up another temporary hospital in Vendôme.

In a recent article in French Historical Studies, Rachel Chrastil discusses the problems that Red Cross volunteers faced from military and government officials who did not recognize their authority. Cahen had witnessed this in Metz, so when she arrived in Vendôme, she laid it on the line to the Quarter-Master General:

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You have nothing ready here and you no longer have the time to get anything ready; I have enough material; I will put everything that I've gathered at your disposition and in return, you will lend me your authority. We don't know what may happen. You may be forced to leave and then I would be left with all the wounded but without any power. That would be an impossible situation.\textsuperscript{7}

Her proposed quid pro quo succeeded, and she was accorded, she recalled, "a broad mandate that in a way conferred on me military powers and gave me the right to requisition."\textsuperscript{8}

The battle of Vendôme in mid-December forced the French army into retreat westward, and the German army entered the town. Cahen remained at her ambulance, which at that point was treating German as well as French wounded. She dealt with German officers and doctors, earning their respect and gratitude.

After the war, Cahen asked the SSBM to send her to Germany to nurse French prisoners of war. When the organization snubbed her, she went on her own. Using the reputation she had won in Vendôme and letters from influential people, both French and German, she was granted access to POWs that the Red Cross had been unable to reach, captured francs-tireurs (irregular soldiers), for example, and men who had been incarcerated for breaches of prison-camp discipline. With the French government's covert blessing, she negotiated on their behalf; some accounts credit her with gaining the early release of three hundred such prisoners.\textsuperscript{9} She also brought back to France information from German records about French dead and wounded, establishing the fate of many missing soldiers. In the end, both sides recognized her humanitarian work: the German empress gave her a Red Cross medal, and in 1888, the French government awarded her the Legion of Honor. After returning to France, Cahen devoted herself to Jewish charities, in particular a

\textsuperscript{7} Cahen, \textit{Souvenirs}, 6.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{9} Du Camp, "La bienfaisance israélite," 278; Prague, "Une Juive patriote," 83.
refuge for Jewish orphans. She died in 1899, eulogized in the national as well as the Jewish press.  

The central message of Cahen's story—and of all heroine stories from the Franco-Prussian War—was that through her actions, French civilization had triumphed over German barbarism and thus, despite its military defeat, France had achieved a moral victory in the war. Cahen explained that her ambulance gave the same care to German soldiers as to French, "at first from strict humanitarianism and then, I must also say, from a sense of national dignity; I wanted to oblige people to regard us as generous even if we could not be victorious." The exploit that made this point most dramatically, and which was recounted gleefully in all later accounts, was her confrontation with a German general who had raised a Prussian flag over her ambulance in Vendôme. When she protested that her ambulance was and would remain French, he dismissed her with the assertion, "We are masters here!" She replied: "In the town, maybe, but here, no! We are covered by the Red Cross and the French flag, and you have no right to touch one or the other." She then threatened to close the ambulance if the Prussian flag was not lowered immediately. He agreed, calling his action a favor to her in return for her care of German wounded. But she would have none of his favors, insisting instead that he acknowledge her moral authority, which, in the end, he did. "You are right, Madame," he added simply, "perhaps that is

11 Cahen, Souvenirs, 9.
just,\textsuperscript{13} and he had the flag removed. Furthermore, Cahen claimed that when the Germans finally left Vendôme, they saluted her: "We will never forget that you forced us to bow both before your patriotism and your charity."\textsuperscript{14}

In his 1893 compendium of female heroism during the Franco-Prussian war, Joseph Turquan explicitly presented Cahen as a model for contemporary French girls: "She should be placed before the eyes of all our young girls and offered to them as an example."\textsuperscript{15} Turquan joined what was becoming a chorus of voices, led by two of the French Red Cross branches, that declared that women's patriotic duty, comparable to men's military service, was to nurse wounded soldiers. But there were several facets of Coralie Cahen as war heroine that made her problematic in this campaign: first, her religion, as Cahen was Jewish; second, her commitment to humanitarian service above nationalism; third, her participation in the internecine rivalry within the French Red Cross; and most important, the heroine's story itself.

Cahen's religion or race, as it was commonly described at the time, created a problem for this narrative. Although in her long poem in Cahen's honor Amédée Burion compared her to Joan of Arc, most commentators made a point of identifying her as an "Israelite."\textsuperscript{16} As we might expect, the Jewish press celebrated Cahen's background and hailed her as a uniquely Jewish heroine. H. Prague pointed out that, unlike a Sister of Charity, Cahen had received no "special apprenticeship" in the "total immolation of one's entire personality;" it was simply her great Jewish heart that impelled her wartime nursing. This "daughter of a Levy," descended from members of the Paris and Nancy Consistories, was a "glory for Israel."\textsuperscript{17} L'Universe israélite protested when a long, laudatory review of her memoirs in Le Temps failed to mention her faith: "When a malefactor by chance turns out to be

\textsuperscript{13} Cahen, Souvenirs, 11.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{15} Turquan, 1870–1871, 289.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 274; Arnaud and Bonnette, Vaillance et dévouement, 36.
\textsuperscript{17} Prague, "Une Juive patriote," 81.
Jewish, it rarely escapes comment; why then should this quality be passed over in silence when the facts are of the kind to do us honor?\textsuperscript{18} The Jewish press asserted that Cahen's story refuted anti-Semites' claims that Jews felt no loyalty to France.

At this time when a certain press stains the patriotism of Jews with iniquitous suspicion, when their devotion to country is systematically denied, a career like that of Mme Coralie Cahen, ended recently by her death, is the most appropriate reply that one can make to the bad faith or the blind passion of our detractors.\textsuperscript{19}

Articles in mainstream publications made the same point, in less vehement language. Writing in 1888, Maxime Du Camp posited that her story must lay to rest any doubts "that the Israelites have only an incomplete commitment to the Patrie."\textsuperscript{20} However, with the Dreyfus Affair waiting in the wings, such doubts could not be easily assuaged, especially for the Catholic Right.

Some of the clergy criticized volunteer nurses for usurping what was properly the role of nuns. As one Jesuit writer explained, most women were bound by domestic duties that prevented them from devoting themselves to the care of the wounded, while women from higher society were a positive nuisance in an ambulance. Only nuns, he claimed, had the patience, resignation and "angelic sweetness" necessary for the work. "[N]uns seem designed by destiny for ambulance work."\textsuperscript{21} Militant Catholics like journalist Louis Veuillot actually decried Red Cross nurses as instruments of a republican anticlerical campaign.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{19} Prague, "Une Juive patriote," 81. Also see B. M., "Madame Coralie Cahen," 805-09.
\textsuperscript{20} Du Camp, "La bienfaisance israélite," 278. Also see Normand, "Association des Dames françaises," 60.
\textsuperscript{21} A. L. Du Prëy, \textit{Les femmes de 1870} (Saint-Omer, 1874), 57.
Cahen defended herself against such criticisms by pointing out that as a childless widow she had no family obligations and by praising the nuns who worked under her direction in Vendôme. She recalled how moved she had been when they asked if they could call her "Mother" as they did their superior.\textsuperscript{23} Du Camp claimed that Cahen chose her assistants from the Marianist order of the Holy Cross because "she knew from experience that, for tending the sick, there can be no one more punctual, more devoted, more attentive than women belonging to religious congregations."\textsuperscript{24} By contrast, the Jewish press explicitly rejected the idea that nuns were the best nurses, arguing that Cahen's experience in Jewish charities coupled with her "compassionate heart," and her "devoted and enlightened patriotism" equipped her "magnificently" for wartime nursing.\textsuperscript{25}

Also problematic was her proud claim that she had treated German casualties exactly the same as French soldiers. Perhaps even more troubling, she asserted that in German prisons she had found that the Germans treated French soldiers exactly as they treated Germans incarcerated for the same crimes. Finally, there was the commendation from the German empress. By implying that Germany too possessed fairness and honor, Cahen undermined the story of France's moral triumph over barbarism. Moreover, she placed in doubt the formulation of nursing the wounded as specifically national service. As Chrastil has pointed out, although neutrality was written into the International Red Cross charter, it was hardly practiced in French Red Cross campaigns. Beginning in the mid-1880s, a series of decrees had placed all three French Red Cross organizations under the authority of the military and tied them explicitly to the French state; as a result, the Red Cross promoted patriotism and rarely mentioned humanitarianism in its publicity.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{23} Cahen, \textit{Souvenirs}, 12.
\textsuperscript{24} Du Camp, "La bienfaisance israélite," 277.
\textsuperscript{25} Prague, "Une Juive patriote," 81, 83.
\textsuperscript{26} Chrastil, "The French Red Cross," 455-59.
By the 1890s when French school girls were repeating in their notebooks the probably fictional story of Suzanne Didier's execution by the brutal Hun, humanitarian like Cahen's was rendered suspect. In her civics textbook for girls, Clarisse Juranville wrote that, although "the Geneva Convention would especially attract girls' sympathy . . . alas, its rules are always more or less violated," so girls must learn to support the military and prepare to do their part to defend France. "It is only in the shadow of bayonets that both national and private fortune can flourish." A weekly magazine for elementary school teachers warned that love of humanity must follow not precede love of country in their lessons. Only by loving and defending France could students serve humanity. Paul Bert, writing in a girls' civics textbook under the pseudonym of Henriette Massy, dismissed any attempt to link patriotism and humanitarianism. He bluntly asserted that those who put humanity's interest above that of country were cowards, trying to avoid their patriotic duties.

Cahen's story, as well as Cahen herself, had also become involved in the complicated internal politics of the French Red Cross in this period, a competition that produced three organizations. Cahen was a leading light in the Association des Dames françaises (ADF), founded as a rival to the Société de secours aux blessés militaires in 1879. A third organization, the Union des Femmes de France (UFF) split from the ADF. Although the three organizations eventually agreed to cooperate, rivalry among them remained strong right through the First

29 "La patrie," L'Instruction primaire 13, no. 34 (1891): 563-66; Henriette Massy [Paul Bert], Notions d'éducation civique à l'usage des jeunes filles (Paris, 1884), 179. There are even more explicitly chauvinistic texts, like Gabriel Vicaire, Le livre de la patrie (Paris, 1885), 13: "We are no longer citizens of the world. We only wish to be French."
World War. In her story, Cahen acknowledged that she was indebted to the SSBM for material and for her posting to Vendôme, but implicitly criticized the organization for excluding her from its work in Germany and boasted that she was able to succeed where the SSBM had failed. Thus, Cahen was a partisan heroine; the ADF mentioned her story, but both other organizations ignored it.

Despite her association with the Red Cross, Cahen was not really the ideal volunteer nurse that the ADF and the UFF desired. Although she was the widow of a doctor, Cahen had no training in first aid or nursing. As Rachel Chrastil has pointed out, these organizations did not merely champion women's wartime volunteerism, they promoted peacetime nursing training for women. Just as men needed to be trained to become good soldiers, so women needed to be trained to become effective and efficient nurses. Red Cross promoters, Drs. Arnaud and Bonnette, wrote that, due to France's small population, women must take over military nursing during wartime:

> To achieve this, . . . every woman must consider it her patriotic duty, in peacetime, not simply to join the Red Cross, to sew bandages, sheets, and compresses destined for the wounded in less fortunate days, but especially to serve a real, practical internship in a civil or military hospital in order to make contact with the sick, with the soldier, and to accustom herself to his spirit.

César Legrand, another military doctor and Red Cross promoter, concurred, but stressed scientific training over personal contact. "The nurse must receive training that combines scientific theory with practical apprenticeship." He described the Red Cross

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31 See *Le Bulletin de l'Association des Dames françaises* of July 1888 for example. By contrast, in his lecture to the UFF, *Les heroïnes du secours*, Bourges traced the history of women's battlefield nursing, praising the nuns and *cantinères* of the past and Sarah Bernhardt and other "dames du monde" who set up hospitals during the Franco-Prussian war, but he did not mention Cahen.

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volunteer as "more than an aide, she is the doctor's collaborator and this position implies the need for special instruction."\textsuperscript{33}

According to the Red Cross, French women's hearts had been in the right place in 1870, but they had lacked the structure, leadership, materials, and training to nurse properly. Red Cross publicists, although praising the patriotism of the ladies who had run ambulances during the Franco-Prussian War, also ruefully commented on their lack of scientific knowledge. Referring to a painting exhibited at the Salon of 1890 celebrating the Comédie Française's wartime hospital, ADF promoter Dr. Eifer proclaimed this enterprise charming but impractical. "You don't improvise a nurse any more than you improvise an actress; each career requires a long apprenticeship."\textsuperscript{34} Maxime Du Camp specifically mentioned Coralie Cahen as one of these "improvised" nurses. Although he praised Cahen's devotion, he warned that this was not a course to follow in the future: "Never again should we be caught unprepared by events, as we were in July 1870, having to organize in the midst of battle, in the face of the enemy."\textsuperscript{35}

Unlike the SSBM, which appealed to women initially as fundraisers, the ADF and the UFF wanted women to enroll in first aid classes in order to prepare to nurse if war broke out. Some promoters had even grander visions. Drs. Arnaud and Bonnette believed: "In our own territory, in auxiliary and even in military hospitals, only ladies of the Red Cross should be used in the different services—dressing, surgery, linens, kitchen—under the direction of a military female nurse major or a female head nurse."\textsuperscript{36} The Red Cross should train women to organize and

\textsuperscript{33}Dr. César Legrand, \textit{L'assistance féminine en temps de guerre} (Paris: Librairie universelle, 1907), 263, 270.

\textsuperscript{34} Dr. Eifer, "Causerie médicale: Nos ambulancières en temps de guerre," \textit{La femme de l'avenir} (1 October 1899). Eifer went on to praise the training currently provided by the ADF. Similarly, Normand promoted the ADF in his article about Cahen in \textit{Le Revue bleue}.

\textsuperscript{35} Du Camp, "La Croix rouge," part 2, 258, 260-1. Also see Bourges, \textit{Les héroïnes du secours}.

\textsuperscript{36} Arnaud and Bonnette, \textit{Vaillance et dévouement}, 99.
operate wartime medical facilities as well as work in them. The age of amateur volunteerism was over; Madame Cahen's experience was embarrassingly outmoded.

There is a more fundamental reason why those who promoted volunteer nursing as the feminine version of military service failed to exploit Cahen's story. Although nursing was the backdrop, Cahen's drama was not essentially about nursing but about war heroism. It was in the same genre as the stories of Suzanne Didier or Joan of Arc, tales of exceptional courage in exceptional circumstances. Such accounts were inspirational, but they were not really intended as models for all girls and women. School lessons regularly reminded girls that, although they lived "in the land of Joan of Arc," their patriotism was essentially domestic: to raise patriotic sons, prepare bandages, nurse the wounded, and raise morale. As one civics textbook reminded its readers, heroism was "required of women only exceptionally."

The ADF and the UFF wanted to convince both French women and the French military that, although women did need training to volunteer to nurse in wartime, such nursing did not require exceptional courage. Army doctor César Legrand declared, "Yes, when a woman ties a white nurse's apron around her waist and pins a French red cross to her chest, she takes on the insignia that can lead her to heroic enterprises," but never beyond her natural capacities, just as military service was within the capacity of most Frenchmen. In 1899 a Red Cross promoter declared: "When the whole nation rises up to defend the soil and patrimony of France, the two sexes have an equal duty but different destinations: the men to combat, the women to

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37 S. A. Nonus, Résumés des leçons de morales et d'instruction civique: Cours moyen et supérieur. Édition spéciale aux écoles de filles (Amiens: Poiré-Choquet, 1904), 17. See the collection of schoolgirls' notebooks for this period in the Musée nationale de l'éducation in Rouen, series 3.4.01 especially #82.073, the 1901 notebook of Jeanne Moustache; #88.377-2, the 1907 notebook of Marguerite Bloch; and #79.35825, the 1893 notebook of an anonymous girl.

38 Legrand, L'assistance féminine, 283.
The desire and ability to nurse, the Red Cross claimed, was based in women's maternal instinct; all that the Red Cross did was to extend this instinct from the private sphere to the public sphere, from the individual child to the nation. There was nothing extraordinary about this mission, they insisted. "Motherhood, which is the deepest of sentiments in women, is affirmed by their appropriate sacrifice in nursing the wounded."\(^{39}\)

The heroine story raised a second, touchier issue: masculine inadequacy. Women became heroines only when men's heroism failed. Central to all the Franco-Prussian War heroine stories is women's reclamation of French honor that military defeat had jeopardized. In these stories, Cahen's included, women personified French civilization in combat with German barbarism, and French civilization emerged triumphant. French women achieved the true victory "even if," as Cahen admitted, on the battlefield "we could not be victorious." Alfred Mézières wrote in *Le Temps*, "When I think with despair that France produced a Marshal Bazaine, I lift up my head again in thinking of Mme Cahen."\(^{41}\) Thus, the heroine did not complement or support the masculine war effort; she replaced it.

So a number of issues emerged in Coralie Cahen's story that made it less than ideal for Red Cross propaganda. First her religion and her partisanship in the Red Cross rivalry weakened the appeal of her tale. Second, the ADF and the UFF campaigned to convince "everywoman" to train for wartime service as a volunteer nurse. Although Cahen seemed to exemplify this role, her story could also undermine these organizations' goal. Cahen had no training in nursing, she simply "improvised," and the

\(^{39}\) *Le Petit Parisien*, 29 November 1899. See also Darrow, *French Women*, 28-30.

\(^{40}\) Du Camp, "La Croix rouge," part. 2, 245-46. Also see Arnaud and Bonnette, *Vaillance et dévouement*, 8.

\(^{41}\) Mézières, "Variétés: Carnet d'un prisonnier." By surrendering Metz, Marshal Bazaine became a scapegoat for the French defeat. In 1873 he was court-martialed for treason, convicted, and sentenced to death, although his sentence was commuted to twenty years in prison. He soon escaped and lived in exile in Spain.

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accolades she won suggested that no training was necessary. But more important was her status as heroine. The central act of her saga—defying the German officer about the flag—moved her story away from one of nursing as women's patriotism into the genre of heroism, the exceptional circumstance for which Cahen was honored. In this discourse, by confronting and defeating the German officer, Cahen's heroism replaced male patriotism; it is she, rather than the French army, that defeated Germany. This was certainly not the message that the Red Cross wanted to convey to its volunteers, to society or, especially, to the military. In fact, to counter fears of female incursion upon male territory, Red Cross promoters stressed the subordination of volunteer nurses to military authority, depicting them as silent, obedient assistants.42

As a result, Coralie Cahen, despite—or perhaps because of—her Légion d'honneur award, did not figure in Red Cross publicity in the years prior to the First World War. By August 1914, unlike some of the other Franco-Prussian war heroine stories, her story had faded from public consciousness. Although some young telegraph operators were inspired by Juliette Dodu, for example, First World War volunteer nurses did not model themselves after Madame Cahen.

42 Legrand, L'assistance féminine, 273-4; Witt-Guizot, La femme et la guerre, 31-32.