Who Lost the Franco-Prussian War?
Blame, Politics, and Citizenship in the 1870s

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I would like to open with two contrary opinions of why France lost the Franco-Prussian War and international prestige in 1870-71. The first is an editorial from 1874 from the newspaper *L'Union de la Sarthe*, based in Le Mans. "If we are isolated in Europe," the author wrote, "if we can find neither alliance, nor aid, nor true sympathy from our neighboring nations, it is the fault of the French Republic, which is a calamity."\(^1\) The second opinion comes from the mayor of a small town near Le Mans, an opponent of Napoleon III's Second Empire, who wrote in 1873: "Let this . . . disastrous experience instruct us and convince us that we must never give the fatherland to one man, whoever the man may be and whatever the circumstances."\(^2\) These two selections are typical of the highly politicized commentary about the war carried out in the press and in legislative campaigns during the 1870s. They do not tell us very much about why France lost or what the authors thought France ought to do next. Instead, they illustrate common strategies and policies across political divides. Debate over the Franco-Prussian War contributed to three crucial aspects of French politics during the 1870s: France's

\(^1\) E. S., *L'Union de la Sarthe*, 6 Sept. 1874.
policies concerning Germany, the establishment of the Third Republic, and the role assigned to ordinary citizens in times of national crisis.

The German Empire was not the focus of French politicians' animosity. The Prussians were the instruments of the defeat, but they were not to blame. Blind resentment of the victors, it was believed, would be politically and diplomatically disadvantageous. Instead, each side reassured the country that it would promote peace and stability. Republicans in particular managed to reconfigure themselves as the representatives of peace, which contributed to their critical electoral successes in the 1870s.

In their second point of agreement, political candidates argued that France had to look to itself for the reasons for the defeat. Specifically, French political and military leaders should bear the brunt of the responsibility for their military and diplomatic preparations for war and for their actions during the conflict.

Third, politicians agreed that ordinary citizens, whether soldiers or civilians, had done the best they could under the circumstances. With few exceptions, no politician demanded more of them in the face of invasion. This stance diminished the potential role for civilians in future national defense. In sum, politicians from across ideological categories shared the same general strategy for winning over voters: promote peace with Germany and focus attention on the failings of prominent individuals.

The republicans won votes and gained control of the government using this strategy. The formula failed to satisfy some groups, however, even if they accepted republican candidates. Men of letters and people living in areas that had been severely disrupted by the war, such as the northeastern department of the Meurthe-et-Moselle, tended to look to the French nation as a whole for the
causes of the defeat. In the debate over who was to blame for the loss of the Franco-Prussian War, the important conceptual division did not fall between republicans, Bonapartists, and conservatives, but rather between politicians and men of letters.

**Revanchisme**

The historical term *revanchisme* broadly refers to supposed French antagonism toward Germany during the early French Third Republic. It evokes a mythologized national goal of wreaking revenge for the humiliation of 1870 by recovering Alsace-Lorraine. *Revanchisme* was in reality more complicated and less potent. Over time it varied in the extent of its popularity, its precise goals, its links to particular political or intellectual persuasions, and the extent of organized movements to promote it. While it would be foolish to dispute that xenophobia and nationalism ran high in some quarters in late-nineteenth-century France, the desire for revenge played only a minor role in French politics during the 1870s.

*Revanchisme* was largely confined to men of letters and science, such as Ernest Renan and Louis Pasteur. They deplored the German Empire's embrace of Bismarckian calculation and authoritarianism, which appeared to subordinate all that was lofty, subtle, and spiritual about German culture to the doctrine of might makes right. The

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raw violence and state power exercised during the Franco-
Prussian War permanently altered their faith in the spirit of coopera
tion that governs intellectual endeavor. It should be
noted, however, that intellectuals in the early 1870s were
far less interested in using military action to pursue
nationalistic goals than were influential writers and
activists of later generations such as Maurice Barrès,
Charles Maurras, and Charles Péguy. Most scholarship on
revanchisme through the 1970s concerned these later and
more aggressive writers and intellectuals.

Turning from intellectuals to politicians, the picture is
quite different. The revanchiste perspective argues that the
Franco-Prussian War provided a national political objective
for revenge, which unified the French through the difficult
first months of the Third Republic and molded the central
government's policies on military reform. Since the late
1970s, however, most scholars—notably Allan Mitchell and
Bertrand Joly—have rightly diminished the role that
revanchisme played in French politics during the early

4 See Maurice Barrès, Violons de Lorraine: Recueil de chants
lorrains de Maurice Barrès (avec une introduction) (Bayonne: Louis
Lasserre, 1912); Robert Soucy, Fascism in France: The Case of
Maurice Barrès (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972);
University Press, 1979); H. L. Wesseling, Soldier and Warrior: French
Attitudes toward the Army and War on the Eve of the First World War,
5 Claude Digeon, La Crise allemande de la pensée française
(1870-1914) (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1959); Société
d'Histoire Littéraire de la France, Les Ecrivains français devant la
6 Wesseling, 5; Wolfgang Schivelbusch, The Culture of Defeat: On
National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery, trans. Jefferson Chase
(New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003), 128; Henry Contamine, La
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Third Republic. Politicians and journalists during the early 1870s were in fact more concerned with securing their political vision for a renewed French nation than with focusing on Germany. Ministers opposed any domestic calls for revenge, and the government sought to emulate the German Empire, not to confront it. For most of those involved in politics, revanchisme quickly fell by the wayside.

**Politics of Peace, Politics of Blame (1871-77)**

The problems with France itself—not its relationship with Germany—could not be ignored. Candidates hoped to convince the public that the defeat was the fault of other political parties. Even the most concrete cause for the defeat, such as a lack of equipment for the army, could be probed for political origins. A careless phrase could be taken to signify the illegitimacy of an entire political

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Each side argued that it alone aimed to preserve the peace.

The elections to the National Assembly in February 1871 demonstrated the extent to which French voters and their candidates desired peace. Conservatives, whether they supported the Empire or a form of monarchy, argued that the nominally republican wartime Government of National Defense should have sued for peace immediately instead of continuing to fight. The leaders of this government had gambled that they could turn the disaster into the springboard for a new political system, and they lost. In the February 1871 elections, just weeks after the armistice, conservative monarchists won brief vindication. Although conservatives split among themselves, their political critique of the Government of National Defense as dictatorial, unstable, and bellicose remained popular in the early 1870s.

Few expanded the scope to call into question European values or human nature. Guillaume Monod, who lamented the corruption of Protestantism by the Germans in *La France et la réformation en deuil* (Paris: Librairie protestante, 1871), might be considered an exception.


In the 1870s the National Assembly published an inquiry aimed at exposing the dictatorship of the Government of National Defense during the war: *Rapport fait au nom de la Commission d'Enquête sur les actes du Gouvernement de la Défense Nationale* (Versailles: Cerf et fils, Imprimeurs de l'Assemblée Nationale, 1873-75); Bertrand Taithe,
Over the five years following the elections of 1871, republicans made a series of steady gains in by-elections. As we know from the scholarship of Sanford Elwitt, Philip Nord, James Lehning, and P. M. Jones, republicans won over voters not only through ideological argument, but also by strengthening ties with the bourgeois capitalist class, encouraging the use of the ballot rather than demonstration, and convincing urban and rural voters that a republican government would serve their economic interests. These strategies succeeded in large part because republicans recast themselves as the promoters of peace. They completely remade their hawkish image, which dated from the 1790s. The republicans recognized that they could not realistically regain Alsace-Lorraine through a new offensive war. France's best chance to reclaim its former glory was to present a united, peaceful front to the rest of Europe. It was politically advantageous both within France and internationally to distance the Third Republic from the wars of the French Revolution, from the imperial pursuits

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12 Ninety-nine republicans won and only twelve monarchists and three Bonapartists (Wright, 213).

of the first Napoleon, and from the revolutionary fervor of the Commune.\textsuperscript{14}

In addition to reformulating themselves on the side of peace, republicans attacked Napoleon III and the ministers of the Second Empire.\textsuperscript{15} Two infamous, careless phrases haunted the leaders of the late Second Empire for decades. First, in a speech to the Legislative Corps on 15 July 1870, Council President Émile Ollivier, leader of the reform party, stated that he and his ministers accepted responsibility for the war "with light hearts." This flippant remark came to symbolize the insouciance and over-ambition of the entire imperial regime.\textsuperscript{16} Second, Minister of War Leboeuf's claim on 14 July 1870 that "We are ready, very ready!" for war, reportedly adding, "to the last gaiter button," was immediately revealed to be false.\textsuperscript{17} Mobilization of men, arms, and supplies dragged slowly. Critics complained that the Empire had failed to train officers and military planners, especially in science and geography.\textsuperscript{18} These problems were immediately well

\textsuperscript{14} "Les Annonces des journaux nancéiens," \textit{La Feuille du Village}, 6 March 1872.


\textsuperscript{16} The phrase popped up in commentaries on the war in the early 1870s, often without explicit reference to Ollivier: A. Garnier, \textit{Le Lycée du Mans pendant la guerre contre la Prusse} (Le Mans: Edouard Monnoyer, 1872), 6; \textit{Les Murailles d'Alsace-Lorraine: Metz, Sarreguemines, Strasbourg, Haguenau, Saverne, Nancy, etc.} (Paris: L. Le Chevalier, 1874), preface.


\textsuperscript{18} Jules Chautard, \textit{Du Rôle de la science dans la guerre de 1870-1871} (Nancy: Sordoillet et fils, 1871), 7; [J. Latour], \textit{Le Moyen de payer cinq milliards et de préparer la revanche} (Toulouse: L. Hébrail, Durand et Cie, 1871), 23; Gabriel Monod, \textit{Allemands et français}: 

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known, and the National Assembly blamed the Empire in a resolution overwhelmingly passed in March 1871.  

Although politicians often made these criticisms with the intent of achieving the political goal of establishing a republic, subsequent historians of the Franco-Prussian War demonstrate that these initial judgments were usually quite sound.  

Republicans and conservatives seized every opportunity during the early 1870s to use the war to their political advantage, but the next major moment came with the election of a new Chamber of Deputies in February 1876. Though divided among moderates, opportunists, and radicals, republicans continued to cast themselves as the supporters of conservatism and peace, maintaining the status quo between monarchists, who would disrupt the government yet again, and revolutionary radicals. A pamphlet supporting Léopold Galpin, candidate for La Flèche (Sarthe) explained the republican position: "After the war and the invasion, the legacy of the last reign,  


France seeks repose; it wants to be assured not only of peace for today, but also security for tomorrow. The Republic is today the legal government; it is in consolidating it . . . that we can give our country durable prosperity.\textsuperscript{21} Conservative candidates in 1876 also supported order, peace, and French grandeur, as they had in 1871, but they rarely made explicit references to the war. Republicans were better able to convince voters that they—via the negotiations of President Thiers in 1873—had brought an end to the German occupation and that they would do a better job of handling a future war than would the conservatives.

The new legislative elections held in October 1877 following the 16 May crisis became a referendum on the Republic. President MacMahon was the monarchists' hope for holding power until a true monarch could be enthroned, yet he was a military man who had served the Empire. His heightened presence during the campaign of 1877 made it easier for republicans to portray royalists and Bonapartists as having the same goals: to overthrow the Republic and install rule by one man. Once again, republicans and pro-MacMahon conservatives tried to outdo each other in convincing voters that they represented the side for peace.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{21} Archives Départementales [hereafter AD] Sarthe, 3 M 566, Léopold Galpin, \textit{À Messieurs les électeurs de l'arrondissement de La Flèche}, 8 Feb. 1876 (also republicans Rubillard (1st Le Mans), 1876, and Lemonnier, (Saint-Calais), 1876). See also Cordelet (2nd Le Mans), in Chambre des députés (1876-1940), \textit{Recueil, Documents électoraux pour les élections législatives du 20 février 1876} [collections in this series hereafter \textit{Documents électoraux}], Sarthe-Deux-Sevres, 1876, and AD Sarthe, 3 M 567, Cordelet, 1876; Cosson (Lunéville), \textit{Documents électoraux}, Manche-Morbihan, 1876.

\textsuperscript{22} On this point across France, see Jean-François Chanet, \textit{Armée nouvelle et république conservatrice, 1871-1879} (unpublished paper, October 2002), 318, and Mitchell, \textit{German Influence},153-70.
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An official government flyer signed by President MacMahon read, "After so many trials, France wants stability, order and peace." Few voters would have disagreed with this sentiment, but many did not believe that MacMahon would help France achieve that goal. Copies of the flyer, preserved at the Departmental Archives of the Meurthe-et-Moselle, testify to the public's divergent responses. On one, a royalist supporter wrote, "No confidence–You have to know how to command a division to command a great people," adding, apparently without irony, "Long live King Henry V." On another copy, a republican repeatedly wrote after MacMahon's name "= Sedan." At MacMahon's words "They tell you that I want to overthrow the Republic," the individual wrote, "It's the truth."

Republican deputies pushing for peace appealed in an open letter to the commercial interests of Lorrainers whose businesses were interrupted by war scares. These deputies promoted their record for peace: they had assuaged any fear that France would become involved in the Russo-Turkish War, and they had resisted conservative efforts to restore the Pope's temporal power. Now they needed votes in order to stay in office and maintain the Republic. One hundred ten men in the Meurthe-et-Moselle, including many municipal councilors and businessmen, signed a response

MacMahon supporters: Welche (1st Nancy), AD Meurthe-et-Moselle (hereafter M-et-M), 3 M 83, Welche, M. Welche devant les électeurs (prof de foi), 1877; Masson (2nd Nancy), AD M-et-M, 3 M 81, Masson, 1877; Michaut (Lunéville), in Documents électoraux, Manche-Meuse, 1877. Republicans: AD M-et-M, 3 M 81, Mézières ( Briey), 1877; Senators Bernard and Varroy in support of republicans in France, in Documents électoraux, Manche-Meuse, 1877; campaign booklet against "Les Candidats de la coalition monarchique" and material for Duvaux (1st Nancy) and Berlet (2nd Nancy) in the same.

23 AD M-et-M, 3 M 81, MacMahon, and anonymous, 1877.
lending their support. As representatives of industry, commerce, and commercial agriculture, they needed to be assured of reliable transportation, market confidence, uninterrupted productivity, and a steady labor force. They regarded a moderate republic as their best hope for protecting these interests. MacMahon's power play of 16 May had disrupted their business, and they feared a return to rule by one man. In 1870, the populations in the east had been, as they put it, "the first victims of personal government"—not victims of German aggression—"and . . . are particularly interested in maintaining peace." Without republican promises of peace, these businessmen might have used their political clout to support conservatives.

The surprisingly infrequent calls for specific military reform in the legislative campaigns of 1876 and 1877 reflected this lack of emphasis on revenge within the realm of politics. It was no secret that the army needed to change in order to face the new standard set by Germany. Former officers called for the reform of military service laws, including the implementation of universal service. But after the military laws of 1872 and 1873, the principle of universal service was still not put into practice, and issues surrounding military education remained unresolved.

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25 [Latour], 12; La Touanne, 107-9; Antoine Chanzy, Campagne de 1870-1871: La Deuxième Armée de la Loire, 8th ed. (1872; Paris: Plon, 1885), 477. Chanzy was also elected deputy and senator.
promises for military reform or any other policy targeted at improving France's performance in a later war rarely surfaced in campaign propaganda.²⁷

Another indication that French politicians were not consumed with revenge is that they rarely emphasized their own experiences during the war, whether in military service or in positions of civilian leadership. Those who campaigned on their service records found that this strategy was by no means a guarantee of success.²⁸ Lack of service was not a hindrance to being elected, either. Candidates very rarely attacked their opponents for their wartime actions or inaction, even though the principle of universal service was gaining momentum.²⁹ Neither French electors nor political parties felt that it was necessary for their legislators to have military experience in order to help

²⁷ Table 1:

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<th>Hérault</th>
<th>M-et-M</th>
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<td>1877</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
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Sources: AD M-et-M 3 M, AD Sarthe 3 M, and Documents électoraux 1876, 1877.

²⁸ Of the twelve candidates from the Hérault, the Sarthe, and the Meurthe-et-Moselle who mentioned their service during the war over the period 1876-93 (nine military, three civilian), only four won.

²⁹ One known example: the Ladoucette campaign (Briey, Meurthe-et-Moselle, 1876), in Documents électoraux, Manche-Morbihan, 1876.
France recover from the Franco-Prussian War. Political affiliation mattered more than military experience or a specific agenda for reform.

**Citizens, Politics, and Blame**

By 1877, the republicans had managed to secure their form of government by convincing enough people that they would maintain security and stability in France. However, they achieved this goal by defining the war problem as a political issue, which could be solved by political means. The highly politicized uses of the Franco-Prussian war poorly camouflaged very real issues stemming from the war that continued through the early Third Republic. I have already argued that their discussions lacked serious debate over specific policies concerning military organization and decision-making processes. In addition, they avoided suggesting that civilians or ordinary soldiers might have acted differently in the field of operations. It was not politically useful to attack the very citizens whose votes they were trying to attract, so they reserved scapegoating for the defeat for politicians and generals. Ordinary soldiers received little blame for the poor performance of the military, even though drunk, undisciplined career soldiers populated the French regular army at the time.\(^{30}\) Instead,


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the soldiers routinely received praise for their bravery and sacrifice.\textsuperscript{31}

In addition, politicians in the early 1870s rarely asserted that civilians ought to have put up a stronger resistance to the invasion by engaging in guerrilla warfare, resisting requisitions, running hospitals, cutting telegraph lines, or passing information. When these actions occurred, the government and the public praised them, but no politicians in the early 1870s, regardless of political persuasion or region, argued that civilian sacrifice or activity during war should have been greater. This strategy diminished the possibility that citizens might have something to offer the nation in the future. Individual citizens were no longer viewed as the raw material for the next people's army. The wartime Government of National Defense had hoped for a repeat of the 1792 victory of the people's army at Valmy, but the improvised volunteers could not match the trained Prussian army. The Paris Commune crushed any lingering desire for an armed citizenry. Furthermore, the government did not envision any non-military role for women or civilian men as charity workers, even though voluntary associations had raised and distributed aid and the Red Cross had treated thousands of wounded soldiers during the war. Politicians did not expect average citizens to participate actively in the war and did not directly blame them for the invasion and defeat.\textsuperscript{32}

But despite what the politicians said—or did not say—in their official discourse, many intellectuals and journalists


\textsuperscript{32} Republican politicians did, of course, plan to reform the populace, notably through education, but they did not link education to the Franco-Prussian War in their legislative campaigns.
blamed the general French population for its indirect contributions to France's military woes. Men of letters and science, the same men who were more inclined than politicians to promote the cause of revenge, were also more likely to point to the shortcomings of their fellow citizens for the causes of the war and its upheaval. For men who viewed the Franco-Prussian War as a clash of nations, it was persuasive to believe that the weaknesses of the French national character had determined the outcome. In his first lecture at the Faculty of Sciences in Nancy after the war in April 1871, Jules Chautard declared, "Our political faults have basically the same origin; each seeking pleasure in the underworld of material well-being . . . each neglected his right, had disdain even for his duties as a citizen." Authors in Paris and the provinces alike shared the belief that a lack of religion had contributed to the downfall of France. For some authors, such as historian Gabriel Monod, religious failing was a character flaw that had social and indirect military consequences.  

### Conclusion

The silences surrounding the political legacy of the Franco-Prussian War are as revealing as the ringing trumpet of peace that the republicans hoped would be heard both in the provinces and in Berlin. French politicians were

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33 Monod, *Allemands et français*, 103, 116-17. On the advice of Carol Harrison, I would like to push the analysis of religious responses to the war further with continued research.
not interested in pursuing a policy of revenge against Germany. Revanchisme and military reforms very rarely appeared in legislative campaigns. Instead of focusing on specific policies, politicians attacked each other's political systems. They argued that the form of government was the key to helping France recover and to preventing a future disastrous war.

But many observers found the legacy of the war to be much more complicated. For some, the French needed to undergo moral or character change in order to reclaim their former glory. For others, the difficult legacy of Sedan and the Paris Commune complicated the supposed triumph of the Republic. Candidates understood that appealing to the example of the war could be a useful campaign device, especially in areas that had suffered from the war such as the Meurthe-et-Moselle. However, those French citizens who were inclined to worry that their government was not adequately preparing France for a future war—whether an offensive war of revenge or a defensive war to protect their homes and families—were unlikely to be satisfied by the evidence supplied in legislative campaigns. Many citizens were disillusioned by the improvisation they saw in the National Assembly instead of real reform and plans for future national defense. This disappointment had a profound effect on the development of citizen activists in the decades following the Franco-Prussian War. Many citizens challenged the state to speed the postwar recovery of France, commemorate the soldiers who died, prepare medical service through the Red Cross, or train future soldiers. From the central government's perspective, however, peace in Europe and the preservation of the Republic remained the primary objectives.

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34 Mitchell, *German Influence*, 143; Chanet, 435.