
H-France Review Vol. 16 (November 2016), No. 264

Rachel Chrastil, *The Siege of Strasbourg*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2014. 302 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes and index. \$42 (cl). ISBN 978-0-72886-8.

Review by Robert Tombs, University of Cambridge.

During the second week in August 1870, dragoons from Baden, just across the Rhine, rode into the villages north of Strasbourg. The city's military commander General Uhrich proclaimed a state of siege. On 9 August, a German officer formally summoned him to surrender, and he politely declined. Thus, decorously, began a minor seven-week epic that ended on 28 September in capitulation. During that time, the ancient city and its surrounding fortifications were heavily bombarded. Commentators in France, in neutral countries, and even in Germany, were shocked by an act of war that killed some 300 people, wounded ten times that number, and reduced large parts of the city to rubble, including the Protestant New Church and its great library. The cathedral escaped with damage only to its roof, but images of the historic building and its surroundings in flames created a memorable symbol of martyrdom, and for some confirmed a new image of the Germans as barbarians. Strasbourg was voted away by the French National Assembly on 1 March 1871 to become the German city of Strassburg, amid scenes of patriotic lamentation. With appropriate if unfortunate timing, the city's republican mayor, Émile Küss, died that very day: of a broken heart, said many. The statue representing Strasbourg in Paris's Place de la Concorde was veiled in black as a monument to wounded French patriotism.

In first approaching this book, I admit I was intrigued as to why Rachel Chrastil had undertaken to retell a story well known at least in outline, during a war that has inspired several major histories, and in a genre—military history—which although it is perennially popular with the reading public, is a minority taste among academics.^[1] The answer is that this is not just a military history. While Chrastil does indeed give us the military and political narrative in considerable detail (including two good maps), she is keen to tease out other elements. Moreover, the way she writes suggests that she finds the story moving, and wants us to empathise as she does with the city (whose pre-war bustle and diversity she skilfully outlines) and its people: including Catherine Weiss, struggling to keep her children safe and healthy; Frédéric Piton, retired bookbinder and keen antiquarian; Rodolphe Reuss, historian and diarist; and even Miss Jacot, an English nanny. They left written accounts that are a major source for Chrastil's panorama of life in the beleaguered city. We learn much about how people coped with the practical problems of the siege—unemployment, lack of cash, public health, need for safe shelter, even a shortage of beer—and how some lucky ones got safe conducts to leave.

As well as exploring the human side of the story, Chrastil develops a number of general themes that a more conventional approach might take for granted or overlook. She wants us, for example, to realize the strangeness of the courteous and even friendly messages exchanged by opposing military commanders who were making their best efforts at mutual slaughter. She considers the plight of the population by reference to the economist Amartya Sen's concept of "well-being," determined not only by material conditions but also by such things as the ability and freedom to act and the fairness and

accountability of authority. She also scrutinizes contemporary concepts of victimhood, which focused on women, children and wounded soldiers, but, she reiterates, excluded civilian men. This observation suggests a way into an analysis of gendered ideas of courage and of appropriate behaviour in the face of danger.

These considerations on victimhood connect with a detailed discussion of the development of humanitarianism, its history, practice and assumptions. The event round which this analysis is constructed was an initiative by a group of Swiss burghers who in September persuaded the German authorities to allow a delegation to go into Strasbourg and evacuate over a thousand non-combatants. These were, again, chosen mainly among women, children and the aged; civilian men who sought to leave risked public contempt and derision. Chrastil links a brief history of humanitarianism with her comments on victimhood, and argues that the ideas of victimhood, weakness and need for protection are at the heart of humanitarianism, distinguishing it from the concept of human rights. For the Swiss, she suggests, this humanitarian initiative was an opportunity to build on historic and economic links with Strasbourg and to assert their “identity and exceptionalism” as neutrals (p. 163).

Another humanitarian issue during this war was the much bigger, more prolonged and politically more significant siege of Paris between September 1870 and January 1871, to which Chrastil at times refers. There were both similarities and differences between the two sieges. The most obvious similarity was controversy among politicians, diplomats and the media as to the legality and morality of subjecting civilians to acts of war. This was a time, as Chrastil points out, when some effort had been made to establish written conventions governing war, and to separate and protect civilians from military action. As both Paris and Strasbourg were armed fortresses, the German contention that they could legitimately be blockaded and attacked was legally strong. In the case of Paris, Bismarck put the blame for civilian suffering on the French themselves, “who have chosen to make of this capital a fortress and a battlefield.”^[2] Unlike Strasbourg, whose civilian population could hardly be seen as other than victims of circumstance, “the sovereign Paris mob” (in the King of Prussia’s words) were regarded by many—not only German politicians and soldiers—as blameworthy for having demanded war in June 1870 and subsequently for forcing the Government of National Defence to continue a futile struggle.^[3]

Hence, although in both Strasbourg and Paris civilians as well as fortifications were deliberately targeted, in the case of Paris there was a clear punitive and political motive that went beyond the more general intention (which was considered licit under the “laws and customs of war”) of using civilian suffering to put pressure on military authorities to surrender strategic positions. The Crown Prince of Prussia wanted to inflict on “the ‘modern Babylon’ ... the chastisement it deserves [and] to punish that section of the population whose wickedness was the guilty cause of the war.”^[4] In contrast, the civilian population of Strasbourg was never blamed in this way by the Germans, and their situation was further complicated by the fact that most were ethnically German and destined by the German government to be incorporated into the new Reich. Although a heavy and destructive three-night bombardment of the city was unleashed on 24 August, it was scaled back when the city refused to surrender.

In Paris, in contrast, the siege built up to a bombardment as its climax. But as the fortifications of Strasbourg were much older and less effective than those of Paris, German artillery was able to come closer and do major damage. The bombardment of Paris, on which Bismarck insisted, caused an international sensation but was relatively ineffective. Yet it inspired an alarm that was lacking in the case of Strasbourg: that the city widely acclaimed as the centre of European culture would be devastated, with the loss of artistic treasures of world significance. Many felt that to bombard Paris would be a blow against civilization itself. Diplomats (a few of whom were still in the city) protested. There was a small demonstration in London’s Trafalgar Square. If this is humanitarianism, it is a different kind from that of the Swiss deputation to Strasbourg, concerned essentially with flesh and blood. Equally practical, the Lord Mayor of London launched an appeal for funds and rushed trainloads of food and fuel to Paris as soon as it surrendered. International aid (including from Germany) was also

given to Strasbourg under the aegis of an Aid Committee. Chrastil observes that such humanitarian initiatives were new: no such help had been given to civilian victims of the Crimean War or the American Civil War.

A third general theme she draws out of the Strasbourg episode is a consideration of three “ethical traditions”: consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics. Consequentialism she relates to the thinking of the city council and Mayor Küss, who by mid-September wanted the city to capitulate in order to save its people from the consequences of a looming German assault. Deontology was the approach of the military commander General Uhrich, following the prescriptions of military law that forbade him on pain of death to surrender a fortress until certain strict conditions were met. Virtue ethics were those of the prefect, Edmond Valentin, who had smuggled himself into the besieged city at considerable risk as the representative of Gambetta’s patriotic government, and who wanted to defend the city *à outrance* for the honour of France and the Republic, irrespective of the fate of its people and their property.

As interesting as the purity of these ethical dilemmas is the messiness of the compromises that ensued. The city surrendered on 27 September before the Germans had attempted an assault. This broke French military law, and although Uhrich was not subsequently shot, he was semi-disgraced. The city council continued its administration under German authority, and the citizens came to terms with being German subjects. German tourists flocked to see their newly conquered city, and the German government eventually paid for most of the damage done by its siege guns. The career of the journalist Auguste Schneegans, one of the leading characters in the book, is perhaps emblematic: a patriotic republican, he left Strasbourg for Lyon in protest after the annexation, returned a few years later to found an autonomist Alsatian party, and ended his career as German consul-general in Genoa. Thus the Strasbourgeois—or Strassburgers—made the best of their hybrid Franco-German existence, while being often unwilling symbols of rival nationalisms. Their position was long awkward and sometimes traumatic, but now, Chrastil suggests, it can be lightly assumed within the protective folds of the European Union: “Europeans on both sides of the Rhine can walk, bike or drive freely across bridges from Germany to France and back again” (p. 242). The Front National, however, has been increasing its strength in most of Alsace, so the story may not have an entirely serene ending.

This, in short, is an interesting and original book, and the author comes up with some fruitful insights, even though I feel she occasionally shows a (pardonable) excess of zeal in ascribing to Strasbourg and its siege a great historic, even universal, significance: “The siege can be read as a metaphor for human frailty and limitations” from which we can all learn in “the besieged circumstances of our lives” (p. 201). Like the whole “War of 1870,” once the founding epic of both the Second Reich and the Third Republic, Strasbourg’s saga has inevitably been overshadowed by later, bigger and bloodier wars and sieges. The ethical and legal problems that it seemed in its day to have thrown up—particularly the question of the rights of civilians in besieged cities—soon proved to be archaic. This war of 1870 was unusual not because it involved civilians in hostilities (though the German army remained obsessed with the largely illusory menace of *francs-tireurs*), but on the contrary because it was the last major European war in which civilians were still mostly kept out of the fight. Next time, not only fortified cities but whole nations would be conscripted, starved and bombarded without compunction as the ultimate means of victory.

NOTES

[1] Notably Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France 1870-1871* (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1960), François Roth, *La Guerre de 70* (Paris: Fayard, 1990), and Dennis Showalter, *The Wars of German Unification* (London: Arnold, 2004), all of which deal concisely with the siege of Strasbourg; Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *1870: La France dans la Guerre* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1989) briefly covers civilian reactions. Oddly, neither Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) nor Bertrand

Taithe, *Citizenship and Wars: France in turmoil 1870-1871* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) seems to mention Strasbourg at all.

[2] Reply to an American diplomatic protest, quoted in *Franco-German War and Insurrection of the Commune: Correspondence of E.B. Washburne, Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of the United States in France* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1878), p. 138.

[3] Quoted in Howard, *Franco-Prussian War*, p. 357.

[4] *The War Diary of the Emperor Frederick III, 1870-1871*, ed. A.R. Allinson (London: Stanley Paul, 1927), p. 247 (Jan. 3 1871).

Robert Tombs
University of Cambridge
rpt1000@cam.ac.uk

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172