

# René Schickele and Alsace

Cultural Identity between the Borders

Áine McGillicuddy

CULTURAL IDENTITY STUDIES

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CIS 11

PETER LANG

Born into a German-French bilingual environment, the once renowned German-language author René Schickele (1883–1940) grew up in the Alsace region – today located in eastern France – during its annexation to the German Empire when links to French culture were frowned upon. In the aftermath of the First World War the situation was reversed when Alsace was reclaimed by the French Republic. In both these phases of its troubled history, Schickele insisted on the importance of Alsace’s right to retain its double cultural heritage between the borders of its powerful rival neighbours and on its potential, as mediator between France and Germany, to promote peace in Europe. These issues are addressed in a critical discussion of a range of Schickele’s works. His controversial wartime drama *Hans im Schnakenloch* affords a wry but penetrating insight into issues of identity in Alsace under German rule up to the war, while his socio-political essays and a novel trilogy, *Das Erbe am Rhein*, were written against the backdrop of the *malaise alsacien* and life under French rule. The historical background to the work is examined in detail as it is intimately bound up with the issues of cultural identity that Schickele explores in his writings.

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René Schickele and Alsace

# Cultural Identity Studies

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Volume 11

Edited by  
Helen Chambers



PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

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*For Tim and Anna*



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## Introduction

‘My origins are my destiny.’<sup>1</sup> The author René Schickele encapsulates the profound and enduring influence of his Alsatian background on his life’s work and political outlook with these words in his ‘Autobiographical Notes’. Schickele, the younger of two sons of an Alsatian father and French mother, was born on 4 August 1883 in Obernai (then Oberehnheim) during one of the more turbulent periods of his region’s history. Alsace, along with part of Lorraine, had been annexed to the Second German Empire after the Franco-Prussian War twelve years previously, but nevertheless retained cultural links with its previous ruler, France. Growing up between borders, which were physical, psychological and linguistic (he spoke French at home, German in school and the German Alemannic dialect, Alsatian, with his friends), shaped his progressive vision for Alsace as the ideal mediator between its two mutually hostile neighbours, France and Germany. In the aftermath of the traumatic experience of the First World War his ideas expanded into the necessity of cultural harmony and peace within and on his homeland’s borders as a pre-requisite for peace in Europe. Schickele was to spend much of his life outside Alsace but this preoccupation with his native region, its cultural identity and situation in a wider European context is a recurrent motif in his writings.

Although French was his mother tongue, Schickele consciously chose German as his literary mode of expression. ‘I did not come into the world

1 ‘Meine Herkunft ist mein Schicksal’. ‘Autobiographische Notizen’, Hermann Kesten, ed., *Werke in Drei Bänden* (Work in Three Volumes), Cologne: Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1959. Here, *Werke*, III, p. 837. All quotations from this collection will refer specifically to the volume from which they are taken, that is, *Werke*, I, II, III. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. Published translated titles are italicised within brackets, Á.M.

with it, I only chose it as a lover'.<sup>2</sup> He is closely associated with German expressionism, and known in particular for editing the expressionist, pacifist journal *Die Weißen Blätter* from 1915 to 1920 in Switzerland, where he spent most of the war years along with many other intellectuals and artists. In the inter-war period, describing himself as a French citizen and a German poet, he chose to live in Badenweiler in southern Germany, across the border from nearby Alsace, where he saw himself as living at the crossroads of Europe. The 1920s and 1930s mark the high point of his literary career, when he enjoyed widespread recognition and was a highly regarded author, greatly admired by contemporary writers and commentators of his times in the fledgling German Republic. With the rising threat of Nazism he and his family reluctantly left their home and Schickele spent the remainder of his life until his premature death in January 1940 in what he regarded as exile in Sanary-sur-Mer, in the south of France. By virtue of his French citizenship he was in a position to aid many fellow German writers and intellectuals who fled to this corner of France from Nazi Germany in the 1930s. His diaries and correspondence from this difficult period of his life provide insight into his and their views on politics and art, their sense of isolation at being cut off from publishers and their German readership as well as fears about the future of Germany and Europe. Like many other German writers of his generation, Schickele became, as he put it, one of the 'ghosts in the diaspora'<sup>3</sup> and he predicted with despondency that 'the next generation will know nothing of us'.<sup>4</sup> In Schickele's case this is indeed what nearly happened. Due to this background and the refusal to conform to the prevailing nationalist discourses of the time, he was throughout his life and for many decades afterwards misunderstood and regarded with suspicion in Germany, France and in his native region.

His life and work have begun to attract attention in recent decades again, however. Professor Adrien Finck of Marc Bloch University, Strasbourg,

- 2 'Ich bin nicht mit ihr zur Welt gekommen, habe sie mir erst als Geliebte erwählt.' Diary entry, 16 December 1933, *Tagebücher* (Diaries), *Werke*, III, p. 1058.
- 3 'Gespenster in der Diaspora.' Diary entry, 11 December 1933, *Werke*, III, p. 1062.
- 4 'Schon die nächste Generation wird nichts mehr von uns wissen.' *Ibid.*, p. 1062.

has been the main instigator in the renewal of interest in Schickele and his works. No longer is the choice of Schickele and his writings an almost forbidden subject in Alsace, as it was only a few decades ago, and although Finck did not write his doctoral thesis on his chosen subject,<sup>5</sup> he has since been a significant contributor to research on Schickele. His first major work on Schickele, published in French in 1982, is, as its title suggests, a general introduction to this prodigal son of Alsace. The main aim of *Introduction à l'Œuvre de René Schickele* (Introduction to René Schickele's Work)<sup>6</sup> was to revive interest in this near-forgotten writer through a wide-ranging discussion of his works as well as furnishing the reader with biographical detail. By Finck's own admission it does not go into any great depth of analysis but aims rather to kindle the reader's interest or serve as a springboard for further research, particularly by drawing parallels between the author's life and works. Maryse Staiber, based in Strasbourg, is best known for her research on Schickele's work during his exile years<sup>7</sup> but also for her collaboration

- 5 Finck recalls that his doctoral supervisor advised him against researching René Schickele if he wished to succeed in his university career – a sign that Schickele was certainly not a prophet in his own land at that time in the 1960s and, as an author who had chosen to write in the German language, remained a taboo subject. See Holger Seubert, *Deutsch-französische Verständigung: René Schickele* (Franco-German Understanding: René Schickele), (Munich: Eberhard, 1993). Preface.
- 6 Adrien Finck, *Introduction à l'Œuvre de René Schickele* (Kehl, Strasbourg: Morstadt, 1982).
- 7 See for example Maryse Staiber, 'Situation de René Schickele en France (1932–1940)' (René Schickele's Situation in France (1932–1940)), *Revue d'Allemagne*, April/June 1986, 265–277. Also, "Pauvre animal bilingue", à propos de René Schickele, *Le Retour: la conscience de soi d'un bilinguisme littéraire contrarié* ('Poor bilingual animal. On René Schickele, 'The Return': cognition of oneself and a thwarted literary bilingualism). Christine Maillard, ed., *Littérature et théorie de la connaissance, 1890–1935; Literatur und Erkenntnistheorie, 1890–1935* (Literature and Theory of Cognition), (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires, 2004), pp. 263–276. Eric Robertson too has written on Schickele's final years in France, comparing his situation to that of Ernst Erich Noth's who also lived in Sanary-sur-Mer. The article examines these writers' switch to writing in the French language and differing ways of coping with life in exile. Eric Robertson, 'The French Exile of René Schickele and Ernst Erich Noth', *German Life and Letters*, 45, 3, July, 1992, 244–248.

with Adrien Finck in the editing of two volumes which group together a number of articles on different aspects of Schickele's life and works. The first followed a conference in Strasbourg in 1983 organised by Adrien Finck entitled *Elsässer, Europäer, Pazifist* (Alsatian, European, Pacifist)<sup>8</sup> which provides the title and focus for a collection of articles, in both French and German, to celebrate Schickele's hundredth birthday. The second volume, entirely in the German language, *René Schickele aus neuer Sicht*,<sup>9</sup> appeared in 1991 and brings together a series of conference papers from a colloquium in Strasbourg in November 1990 commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Schickele's death. These years, 1983 and 1990, regarded as 'Schickele years', mark an attempt on the part of Finck, Staiber and a core group of Schickele scholars, including Joachim W. Storck, Julie Meyer, Charles Fichter and Maurice Godé, to revive Schickele's memory in the public's consciousness, especially in Alsace. Particular areas of study in Schickele research have emerged as especially well documented. General biography and analysis of Schickele's works, his early life and pre-war years in Alsace, the war years, engagement with *Die Weißen Blätter*, the inter-war years spent in Germany, the female characters in his writings, his relationship with French pacifist and Nobel prize-winning writer, Romain Rolland and renowned German author Thomas Mann in addition to the exile years in France have all been discussed in books and articles. Since the 1980s the variety and number of studies on Schickele have increased in quantity and scope, bearing witness to the complexity of his cultural heritage and the diverse manifestations of his treatment of cultural identity and the political situations he lived through. Many studies on Alsace and its political and cultural history have also appeared. These will be referred to in the course of this study but they make scant reference to Schickele, despite the fact that in both his prose and fictional work he displays an unremitting inter-

8 Adrien Finck and Maryse Staiber, eds, *Elsässer, Europäer, Pazifist. Studien zu René Schickele* (Alsatian, European, Pacifist. Studies on René Schickele) (Kehl, Strasbourg: Morstadt, 1984).

9 Adrien Finck, Alexander Ritter, and Maryse Staiber, eds, *René Schickele aus neuer Sicht. Beiträge zur deutsch-französischen Kultur* (René Schickele from a New Perspective. Contributions to Franco-German Culture), (New York: Olms, 1991).

est in and preoccupation with these themes. While research on Schickele to date certainly refers to the socio-political background of his work and the recurring theme of cultural identity, a more exhaustive analysis of these aspects of his work will provide a more comprehensive picture and a deeper understanding of the issues.

This study aims to combine a detailed analysis of his wartime drama, *Hans im Schnakenloch* (Hans in the Mosquito Pit), a selection of his essays and the novel trilogy, *Das Erbe am Rhein* (The Heritage on the Rhine), written in the inter-war years, with a thorough discussion of their historical background and issues of identity and culture in order to afford the reader a better understanding of the political and historical context in which Schickele lived and wrote. The themes of politics and identity will be particularly focused on in the discussion of Schickele's work against the backdrop of France and Germany's differing expressions of nationalism. Included in this discussion will be the polemics of the 'Kultur-civilisation' (culture-civilisation) debate between France and Germany, its impact on Alsace and how it defined its cultural identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is both the initial, formative period for Schickele's writings and the temporal framework in the first part of this study, namely the years of Alsace's annexation, under German rule, particularly just at the outbreak of the First World War, the most critical phase of Alsatian history hitherto. Inter-war Alsace, under French rule, will be examined in detail in the second part of the study. The choice of time-frame, 1914–1932, has been dictated by the selection of works representative of these historical junctures. Among other things, these serve as a means of comparing and contrasting life in Alsace under the rule of both of its powerful neighbours and their attitudes to one another. The traumatic event of war serves as the dividing line between the two experiences.

Using the contrastive historical contexts of Wilhelmine Germany and inter-war France will enable us to examine the question of how cultural identity is formed and how far it is determined by reference to the Other or in opposition to a dominant culture. What emerges is a dialectical relationship between the cultural identity of each collective with its Other

which influences its creation of auto-images and hetero-images.<sup>10</sup> Indeed Alsace's identity cannot be understood without first understanding these Others and their influence on its identity construction. It is important to analyse how both these Others viewed each other as well as Alsace, as the power struggles between France and Germany had such impact on the cultural identity of this region. As history has shown, the animosity in relations between Alsace's neighbours brought with it many repercussions, rendering it impossible to contemplate the possibility of harmonious co-existence of both these cultures. During these periods of intense Franco-German rivalry Alsace experienced great difficulty in integrating fully into these nations. Although the region was claimed by both as an integral part of their Self-identity, Alsace was unable to satisfy France and Germany's demands to identify itself exclusively with one culture rather than the other. Difficult relations between the region and its powerful neighbours were compounded by Alsace's part identification with the Other that these mutually hostile cultures represented for one another. Thus, if the region was regarded as a legitimate part of French and German collective identity, it was equally viewed with suspicion as constituting an element of Otherness within their identity constructs.

Alsace's ambivalent position between these nations can be interpreted as one that inhabits two realities or cultures and is 'forced to live in the interface of the two.'<sup>11</sup> Here identity is defined not only in terms of the Other but also constitutes the Other to some extent. It exists somewhere between these polarities, between Self and its Other. This dialectic relationship causes the Self to focus on itself reflexively and helps it to refine and sharpen its self-definition. Alsace, caught between the polarities of Self and Other during these critical historical junctures, was forced to assert its own sense of cultural identity in the face of the more dominant German and

10 The terms 'auto-image' and 'hetero-image' are used by imagologists to distinguish between perceptions of the Self and of the Other in Image Studies. See for example: Raymond Corbey and Joep Leerssen, eds, *Alterity, Identity, Image. Selves and Other in Society and Scholarship* (Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1991), p. 129.

11 Paul Du Gay and Stuart Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 1996), pp. 91–92.

French cultures which attempted to assimilate the region and suppress its identification with the Otherness each represented for the other.

Throughout its history, exclusion, domination and discrimination of the Other has been an integral part of Europe's evolving identity-formation processes – processes which are of course still ongoing. Attitudes towards the Other vary from epoch to epoch and have been conditioned by factors such as religion, gender, ethnicity and nationalism. The alienation of particular groups reinforces the collective identity of an 'in-group', who partly define themselves through this differentiation. One of the most pervasive and powerful expressions of this process has been the phenomenon of nationalism. There has been an upsurge of interest in the study of nationalism since the 1980s after a lull in the decades following the Second World War and these studies have been conducted principally by historians, anthropologists and sociologists. The failure of alternative economic-political systems, such as the fall of Communism and the rise of neo-Liberalism, contributed to this increased interest in nationalism as countries and regions struggled to assert their culture and identity in the vacuum created by the demise of social utopias in the 1980s.

It has, however, been argued more recently that psychologists too have an important contribution to make in studies on nationalism because 'national structures are crucial in shaping the way people identify themselves'.<sup>12</sup> Belonging to a particular nation shapes the way in which one perceives the world and others, one's self-understanding and identification with a particular group of people. Psychologists have to date principally used the concept of the nation in relation to stereotyping processes but have largely ignored the historical aspect of nationalism, that is, nations as a narrative in which each member plays a role. Usually these narratives invoke a (sometimes) mythical past using cultural artefacts such as language, food, music, folklore, literature or costumes to reinforce the notion of a collective group which has progressed together through time, passing down a cultural heritage through the generations, which contributes to

12 Stephen Reicher and Nick Hopkins, *Self and Nation. Categorization, Contestation and Mobilization* (London: Sage, 2001), preface, ix.

shaping its distinctive identity. However, as Reicher and Hopkins argue: 'it is not the past in itself which provides the material for national narratives. Rather it is the *contemporary* store of historical icons, historical myths and historical images which provides the building blocks'.<sup>13</sup> Reconstructions of the past that its members choose to emphasise and 'remember' in the present will in turn have an impact on future identity processes. The past, the present and future, then, are in continual flux, mutually influencing one another and the collective identity of a particular nation. What nationalists choose to remember and how they inculcate a particular narrative into the collective memory and contribute to its identity formation is an area which could be greatly enriched by collaborative studies in the fields of psychology and history.

Studies in alterity and imagology, influenced by postmodern discourse, have made an important and innovative contribution to debates on national and cultural identity. Here the notion of pre-given, fixed categories such as national identity has been rejected. Rather national identity is articulated as a construct formed from the binary opposition between identity and alterity. Identity in itself is not seen as existing without the presence of the Other. We cannot know what the 'essence' of a national identity is. All we receive are images, very often stereotypical images, and representations, through various media, which can be divided into auto- and hetero-images. Examining what a particular nation chooses but also what it rejects as its defining characteristics, how it views other nations (the Other) and compares itself to them, can aid us in better understanding its own auto-image and its relations in a wider global context. Theories of alterity and imagological analysis provide effective methodologies in current contemporary studies on cultural and collective identity. Imagological terms will thus be used where applicable throughout this study.

Numerous studies, produced by historians, sociologists and anthropologists such as Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* and his posthumous work *Nationalism*, Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Smith's *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalities since 1780* and

13 Ibid., p. 24. My emphasis, Á.M.

Giesen's *Kollektive Identität*,<sup>14</sup> have within their own disciplines examined the phenomenon of nation building, the myths and realities associated with the concept of the nation and the impact it has had on the collective identities of various ethnic groups in Europe over the last two centuries. It is generally agreed in the majority of these studies that nation-states are a product of modernity, 'which rule over a territorially-defined people',<sup>15</sup> although some scholars, such as sociologist Anthony D. Smith, or historian Miroslav Hroch, qualify this with a primordialist argument that 'successful nation-states must have an ethnic core at their heart [...] and nationalism would be ineffective were its appeal not directed at a pre-existent community'.<sup>16</sup> It would seem that although there existed communities which were linked by a common language and customs, these were not important criteria in political terms in pre-modern times. Religious and local ties created much stronger ties between collectives. As Brubaker informs us: 'the subjective "identity" of the vast majority of the population throughout Europe was no doubt largely local on the one hand and religious on the other until at least the end of the eighteenth century. For most inhabitants local and regional identities continued to be more salient than national identity'.<sup>17</sup> The religious bonds are in part due to the fact that 'in pre-modern society priests and scribes transmitted and spread communal memory and celebrated a sense of common identity'.<sup>18</sup> This is particularly

14 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983). Also, *Nationalism* (London: Phoenix, 1997). Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Bernhard Giesen, *Kollektive Identität: Die Intellektuellen und die Nation 2* (The Intellectuals and the Nation, 2), (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999).

15 Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, p. 80.

16 John A. Hall, *The State of the Nation. Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 6.

17 Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 5.

18 Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, p. 157.

true since the time of the Reformation in Europe when Protestants and Catholics defined themselves through their difference from one another, as well as from the Jewish community.

Theorists such as Gellner refute arguments of ancient origins of nationalism. In the pre-industrial age, in 'Agraria', he argues 'cultural similarity is not a political bond and political bonds do not require cultural similarity'.<sup>19</sup> It is only when societies made the transition from 'Agraria' to 'Industria', which brought about higher levels of literacy and the replacement of a plethora of local cultures with fewer privileged higher cultures, that nationalism was born. The slogan 'one culture, one state' is a hallmark of nationalism. Hobsbawm, too, supports the modernist view of nationalism and refers to the various forms of collective belonging that existed in the pre-modern world as 'proto-nationalism'.<sup>20</sup>

In historical and sociological studies of groups, collectives or nations, the terms 'primordial', 'traditional' and 'universal' are frequently employed. They enable us to distinguish the different means by which collectives may be understood. Bernhard Giesen in *Kollektive Identität*,<sup>21</sup> for example, has conducted an in-depth theoretical study on how primordial, traditional and universal 'codes' manifest themselves in different collectives or societies. He uses the term code in order to represent distinguishing features which group together a variety of differences, such as good versus bad, higher versus lower class. This is similar to Freud's hierarchical oppositions of conscious versus unconscious, real and imaginary, and so on. The similarity lies in the necessity of the negative or subjugated term in constituting the positive or dominant term and, indeed, *vice versa*. Codes of collective identity therefore enable members of a community to draw a line between themselves and the 'outside' world and to define themselves through differentiation. Primordial codes are based on differentiation according to gender, generation, kinship, ethnicity or race. Traditional codes depend upon social routine, specific behavioural rules and, most

19 Gellner, *Nationalism*, p. 24.

20 Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*. See in particular Chapter 2.

21 Giesen, *Kollektive Identität: Die Intellektuellen und die Nation* 2.

importantly as the name suggests, on traditions. Finally, implicit in the meaning of universal codes is an element of missionary intent. Such communities, for example, France during the Enlightenment, Communist groups, fascist movements, religious groups, exist in the name of their self-definition of progress and reason and a desire to change the world. Giesen's classifications all contain within them the postmodernist discourse of the presence of the Other, lurking at the fringes of the collective, its very strangeness, outsider or observer status and unfamiliarity reinforcing the bond within the collective. The collective in-group too, in a dialogic relationship with the Other, has by its act of exclusion, conferred the status of outsider, *Fremder*, *étranger* on those whom they do not regard as belonging – whether for primordial, traditional or universalist reasons. Thus both the in-group and the outsider mutually define one another, even in hostility. As we shall see, the three significant collectives that are the focus of this study, namely, France, Germany and Alsace, cannot be categorised in quite such a clear-cut fashion as Giesen's models. Universal, traditional and primordial definitions of collective identity may not give us any clear and easy methods for determining how, for example, France and Germany constructed their own and each others' identities through auto- and hetero-images. What is evident, however, is that these definitions have varying resonance and influence in the different collectives. Germany is most strongly defined as primordial and traditional in this early stage of its national collective identity, whereas France, proud of its past, forged its identity through a spirit of progress and universalism.

With regard to Alsace and its relations with these contrastive French and German collective identities, different constellations provide a framework of analysis for the following chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on the dispute over the position of the border to either the east or west of Alsace. Here I discuss French and German justifications for claims on Alsace as part of their respective collective identities according to their contrasting definitions of nationhood. Emphasis will be placed on this dispute from the late nineteenth century up to the outbreak of the First World War. In particular I will examine France's universalist arguments based on citizenship in favour of the maintenance of the border to the east of Alsace along the Rhine before discussing Germany's primordial and ethnic-centred justifications

for the dissolution of the border on the Rhine and its construction further west marked by the Vosges Mountains. Regionalism in Alsace too is examined and relates in the first instance to the emergence of a particularist regional identity which was a response to Franco-German nationalist antagonisms and in particular the German annexation of Alsace, 1871–1918. This can be regarded as a separatist movement which wished to break with the ruling nation and maintain contact with its Other, in this case, France. The protestor movement, a phenomenon of the early part of the annexation, was gradually replaced by a more conciliatory autonomist movement which no longer sought to resist the ruling power but campaigned instead for a degree of autonomy or independence for Alsace within the construct of the German nation. The development of this consciousness of a particularist identity is reflected in the cultural life in Alsace of the period, especially at the turn of the twentieth century when a new generation of Alsatians came of age who had never known life under French rule, René Schickele amongst them.

Chapter 2, which focuses on the drama *Hans im Schnakenloch*, the first of Schickele's works to be discussed in this study, examines such questions of nationalist claims and regional identity against the backdrop of the impending First World War. Here I consider how an attempt to retain a personal and regional identity which is rooted in duality is challenged by nationalistic bellicosity and the assumption that one can only choose one identity. Schickele's plea for understanding of the Alsatian dilemma during the war, however, is not based on notions of regionalism that are solely inward-looking or over-reliant on nostalgic remembrances of the past, whereby Alsace erects its own psychological borders both to its east and west. Instead he promotes the idea of Alsace's particularist cultural identity and its affinities to both French and German cultures as a means of ensuring Franco-German harmony. Alsace is posited rather as a 'Mittelland' (middle land) whose unique cultural heritage should be used to mediate between its hostile neighbours while continuing to remain part of the German Empire. Questions of cultural identity are addressed on both a political and personal level and the interaction of characters of differing nationalities also serves to highlight the Alsatian crisis of identity.

Chapter 3 presents an analysis of the historical, political and cultural background for the selection of Schickele's works of the inter-war period which will be examined in the following chapter. Here the focus is on Alsace when it is now once again part of the French nation. I examine in detail how this changeover impacted on the development and assertion of Alsatian cultural identity in the face of French hegemonic dominance. Regionalism is again discussed here, in the form of the rise of a more radical form of autonomism within the framework of the French nation. The ever-increasing tensions between France and Alsace during this period and the growing popularity of Nazism and fascist movements in Germany also triggered the rise of separatist movements which gained some support in Alsace, albeit marginally, particularly at the end of the period, just before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Finally, Schickele's utopian vision in a selection of essays which press for the dissolution of borders both to the east and west of Alsace is discussed in Chapter 4, together with his insightful commentary on Franco-Alsatian relations during this troubled phase of Alsace's history. For this inheritor of a double culture, political borders are fluid and irrelevant and instead Alsace is advocated as a potential model for Franco-German harmony, the pre-condition for European co-operation and unity. The particular essays, selected from a much wider repertoire, were chosen as they highlight the problematics of Alsatian identity in this historical context. The problematic nature of politics and cultural identity in inter-war Alsace is revisited too on a fictional level in an examination of Schickele's trilogy of novels *Das Erbe am Rhein*. Here, I trace the tensions in Alsace provoked by the French Republic's nationalist attitudes and the effect this has on the narrator and his family. Again, as in *Hans im Schnakenloch*, the dilemma of Alsatian cultural identity and the importance of cultural heritage are symbolised by the protagonist's personal relations both within his family and with female characters of differing nationalities.

This book aims, therefore, to use key examples from Schickele's work to highlight issues bearing on questions of identity and culture affecting the inhabitants of this borderland, René Schickele's native Alsace, caught between French and German nationalist claims.



## Questions of Nationhood and Cultural Identity in France, Germany and Alsace (1870–1914)

### Introduction

The context for René Schickele's writings is constituted by his particular ethnic group's history and culture which were marked indelibly by the powerful political and cultural influences of two of Europe's greatest and historically rival nations: France and Germany. Up to the mid-twentieth century Alsace was the site of much hostility, political turbulence and hardship for the indigenous population and a bone of contention between its two neighbours. Although the question of Alsace has been resolved since it became a part of the French Republic after the Second World War, we are today witnessing the struggle of other ethnic groups in different parts of Europe to assert their own cultural and political identities, albeit in very different historical, political and geographical contexts, both through peaceful and violent means, whether in Northern Ireland, Spain or in ex-Yugoslavia. It is clear that the nation-state is no longer regarded, as it was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as a fixed and permanent entity containing within its boundaries a homogeneous group of people with a shared culture and past. In reality these were 'imagined communities', as described by Benedict Anderson, owing much of their sense of solidarity to the invention of the printing press, higher levels of literacy and the circulation of national newspapers.<sup>1</sup> Rather, to quote Anderson again, 'old

1 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 4.

nations, once thought fully consolidated, find themselves challenged by “sub”-nationalisms within their borders.<sup>2</sup>

Alsace presented such a challenge to both France and Germany during successive periods of (attempted) integration into these two nations. Indeed, other minority groups presented such challenges to France and Germany in turn, during their forging of political unity and nation building, for example, the Bretons in France and the Danes in Schleswig-Holstein. However, given its particular geo-political position, the situation in Alsace differed to that of other regions or ethnic minorities, struggling to maintain their own identities, language or culture, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>3</sup> Franco-German rivalry and tension has been long established and well documented, thus the parameters of reference are well known. In this sense, then, a reading of a selection of Schickele’s work in the context of the questions surrounding Alsace’s location between two powers and its alternating appropriation by them, allows us to explore a key example of how collective cultural identity is experienced and expressed.

In postmodern terms the notion of a complete and self-sufficient sense of French, German, or indeed any identity, is not tenable. Thus in defining the collective cultural identity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of these rival nations we can only do so in dialectical terms. Their identities are on the one hand constituted out of their differences, but on the other are being constantly destabilised by the threat of the Other. How they were read and experienced in Alsace, which itself did not generate these discourses but at most adopted them – or, more precisely, where such discourses were either imposed from outside or adopted by opinion leaders or ideologically appropriated by culturally specific interest groups and institutions, is another question to

2 Ibid., p. 6.

3 Although Schleswig-Holstein too was the source of dispute between two sovereign states, the tensions existed due to the presence of a distinct Danish minority within this territory. The people of Alsace, by contrast, were neither exclusively French nor German, but possessed their own particular identity and were always referred to as Alsatian or, during the period of annexation, as Alsace-Lorrainers.

be examined here. Alsace, claimed by each collective according to their own self-definitions of cultural identity, yet perceived as an unknown quantity, as part of the Other, was regarded with mistrust and hostility. Thus Alsace simultaneously belonged both to the insider- and outsider-group, due to its particular history and dual cultural heritage. Its identity existed, and indeed to a certain extent still does so today, somewhere in a nebulous 'Grenzland' (borderland) hovering uncertainly between Self and Other, 'in the boundaries *in-between* nations and peoples'.<sup>4</sup> This tension in its identity formation was further intensified and complicated by the existence of sub-cultures within Alsace whose varying degrees of positive identification with either France or Germany led to the unavoidable, if not always desired, detriment of their relations with the rival neighbour.<sup>5</sup> It highlights the complexity of the composition of ethnic identities, even when they may seem self-evident to us at first. This concurs with Anthony D. Smith's perception that:

In many ways it is easier to 'grasp' nationalism, the ideological movement, than nations, the organizational cultures. Even ethnic communities, so easily recognizable from a distance, seem to dissolve before our eyes the closer we come and the more we attempt to pin them down.<sup>6</sup>

In an attempt to clarify the issues of cultural identity in Alsace during a particularly unsettled period of its history, that is its annexation to the Second German Empire, the differing concepts of nationhood in France and Germany, with particular reference to questions of cultural identity, will first be examined before discussing Alsace's response to the experience of existing on the border between these two enemy nation-states.

4 Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 4.

5 For further discussion on these sub-divisions in Alsatian society, see Christopher J. Fischer, *Alsace to the Alsatians? Visions and Divisions of Alsatian Regionalism, 1870–1939* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

6 Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, p. 2.

## The *Kultur-civilisation* debate

The convergence of two such powerful forces in the small territory of Alsace was marked by conflict due to political power struggles and ideologically opposed *Weltanschauungen*, which in their more extreme form manifested themselves through the polarisation of the terms *civilisation* and *Kultur*, representative of France and Germany's respective views on the concept of culture. In the *Kultur* and *civilisation* discourses of Germany and France images of collective 'Self' and 'Other' were polarised. The polemics of the *Kultur-civilisation* debate were to have far-reaching implications for Alsace and its people's self-perception. There have been many studies conducted on the etymological, semantic and ideological development of the concepts, *civilisation* and *Kultur*.<sup>7</sup> Such studies, however, rarely refer to Alsace as a unique space in which the full impact of this conflicting relationship is manifested. These discourses were elaborated as part of Germany and France's identity constructions and legitimations. Their differentiation from one another after the Franco-Prussian War, during a period of intense nationalist rivalries, formed an integral part of their identity formation. During the annexation to the Second German Empire, the people of Alsace developed a strong sense of their own collective identity, both as a symbiosis of French and German influences and a transformation of these into its own expression of cultural particularism. Alsace in part identified to some extent with both French and German cultural definitions, but was

7 See for example: Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck, eds, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* (Basic Historical Concepts. Historical Lexicon on Socio-Political Language in Germany) vol. 7 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992), pp. 679–774. Also, Johann Knobloch and others, eds, *Europäische Schlüsselwörter, Wortvergleichende und wortgeschichtliche Studien* (Key European Words, Comparisons of Vocabulary and Etymological Studies), vol. 3: *Kultur und Zivilisation* (*Kultur and Civilisation*), (Munich: Max Hueber, 1967). Also, François Guizot, *Histoire de la 'Civilisation' en Europe depuis la Chute de l'Empire Romain* (A History of 'Civilisation' in Europe since the Fall of the Roman Empire), (Paris: Hachette, 1985), 1st edn, 1829.

also in part alienated from them. An attempt therefore to categorise an ethnic community such as Alsace at that time is not an easy task, further complicated as it was during the annexation by the fraught interplay and influence of those cultural representations of French and German collective identities within its borders: *civilisation* and *Kultur*.

With the outbreak of the First World War the terms *civilisation* and *Kultur* were politicised to an extreme level. A war memorial in Les Eyzies in the Dordogne region of France aptly expresses this radicalisation and politicisation. It is dedicated to those who fell in the Great War for France and is inscribed with the words, 'À tous ceux qui sont morts pour la civilisation' (To all those who died for civilisation).<sup>8</sup> For France, fighting for their definition of *civilisation* meant defending humanist ideals such as freedom, modern democratic systems, progress and internationalism from what they regarded as German militaristic imperialism and authoritarianism, hallmarks of German *Kultur*, which the French perceived as inward looking and regressive.<sup>9</sup> In Germany the desire to promote German *Kultur*, whilst portraying French *civilisation* as its antithesis, was as fervent as the reverse was in France. Many German intellectuals and writers made their views on this quite clear, including Thomas Mann in his article 'Gedanken im Kriege' (Thoughts in Wartime).<sup>10</sup> Although there was often nothing inherently positive or negative in many of the definitions of German *Kultur* and French *civilisation* propagated at this time, the German press and military eagerly used and abused both of these concepts to serve the war-propaganda machine in the years preceding the First World War. *Civilisation*, associated

8 Ernest Robert Curtius, 'Wandlungen des französischen Kulturbewußtseins' (The Metamorphosis of French Cultural Awareness), *Deutsch-Französische Rundschau*, 1, 1928, p. 728. Cited in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, p. 759.

9 See for example *Europäische Schlüsselwörter*, p. 327.

10 Thomas Mann, 'Gedanken im Kriege', *Die Neue Rundschau*, 25 (1914), 1471–1484. It is quite ironic that in this article Thomas Mann endeavoured to portray France in a negative light using terms, such as scepticism, enlightenment, intellect, that could easily have applied to his own character. It highlights how the war impacted on the judgement of those who normally would have been quite critical of Wilhelmine German society.