

Chapter 10

Historical Background: Under the Domination of the French

Jacob and Anna Landeis' hopes and dreams for an undisturbed family life, as well as those of thousands of other German families along the Rhine, were unalterably changed after a French mob stormed the Bastille on July 14, 1789 and unleashed the forces of the French Revolution on the continent. By 1792 the *Rheinpfalz* had once again fallen under the grip of the French, but this time they intended to make the occupation permanent. The German villagers were subjected to ruinous taxation, their local government and economy was disrupted, their crops were confiscated to support the occupying French army, and perhaps worst of all their sons were conscripted to serve Napoleon's grandiose military ambitions. This chapter will explore these events in detail to provide a background for understanding the next wave of emigration fever that swept the Rhinelands.

The French Revolutionary Era

After the fall of the Bastille in 1789, control of the country passed to the French National Assembly, which imposed sweeping political, economic, religious, and cultural changes. In the ensuing two years all "feudal regimes" in France were abolished. The hereditary titles of the various princes were eliminated, their land holdings were confiscated. The Catholic Church was made subordinate to the state, monasteries were closed, and ecclesiastical lands were nationalized.

The governments of Europe were alarmed, rightly fearing that the Revolutionary turmoil might spread across the Rhine, and that another wave of French expansionism would be unleashed. As a precautionary measure, Prussia and Austria formed a defensive alliance in 1792. The French National Assembly, obsessed with conspiracy theories, was convinced that forces everywhere were mobilizing against them. As a result, in 1792 the National Assembly declared war on Prussia and Austria, claiming that their coalition was evidence of a plan to invade and to restore the old regime.

Seizing the initiative, the National Assembly mobilized the national guard and marched into Belgium, which at that time was owned by the Austrian Habsburgs. The hastily assembled French army was deluded by the hyperbole and rhetoric of the Revolution and ill-equipped for the realities of war. The French soldiers expected that they would be welcomed as liberators when they marched across the Belgian border. Their morale quickly collapsed at the first signs of resistance by the professional Austrian army. As the French troops retreated they cried treason and turned against their own officers. The Austrian army, joined by the Prussians in the Rhinelands, confidently pursued them into France and won a series of victories.

These setbacks triggered another period of mob violence in Paris. After the Austrians and Prussians were turned back at Valmy in September, 1792 the reinvigorated French army renewed the offensive. Launching a dual attack, they conquered Belgium and -- despite the efforts of *Kurfürst* Karl Theodor to remain neutral -- they pushed northward out of Alsace into the Pfalz and seized his territory along the Rhine up to Frankfurt.

In the flush of victory in 1793 the French Assembly proclaimed that the country was a Republic and beheaded Louis XVI. Their ambitions soon waxed out of control.

The Assembly declared war on England and Holland and announced that they were going to export the Revolution throughout Europe.

Europe was appalled by these excesses and shocked at the unexpected French victories. In 1793 the First Coalition formed, consisting of Austria, Prussia, England, Spain, Holland, Portugal, Sardinia, Naples, and various states of the Holy Roman Empire. Renewed by these expanded forces, the allies soon pushed the French back out of Belgium and the Rhinelands, all the way to Strasburg. As the French armies retreated they plundered villages in their path, leaving ruination in their wake. The allies were too fragmented to take advantage of their victories and they could not keep on the offensive. Later that year, having conscripted a massive army of 300,000, the French counter-attacked and pushed the allies back north of the Weisseburg line, forcing them to withdraw across the Rhine in December, 1793. The entire west side of the Rhine was a theater for war throughout 1794 as the French military remained on the offensive. They reconquered Belgium, pushed on to take all of the Low Countries, and also began launching attacks eastward across the Rhine.

Prussia, Spain and Holland made peace in 1795. Holland was transformed into a puppet government of the French, named the Batavian Republic. Prussia was still preoccupied with the partition of Poland, and thus decided to follow a neutralist course, abandoning all claims to its territories on the west bank of the Rhine at the treaty of Basel in April, 1795.

This left Austria alone to shoulder the burden of defending the German states, which it was ill-prepared to do. In September, 1795 the French attacked across the river at Mannheim. *Kurfürst* Karl Theodor, who had tried in vain to remain neutral, surrendered the city without resistance. The French proceeded to attack the Neckar valley toward Heidelberg, but they were finally turned back by the Austrian army under Würmser. The Austrians took the lead and spearheaded attacks across the river, which caused the French to temporarily withdraw from most of the Pfalz. However, the victories of the young Napoleon in Italy forced the Austrians to withdraw in 1796, and the Pfalz once again was in the hands of the French. Thus began a protracted, painful, and unchallenged period of military hegemony and exploitation of the Rhinelands by the French that didn't end until 1814.¹

The Palatinate Under French Occupation

The people of the Rhine Pfalz were quickly swept up in the opening act of these dramatic events. By 1792 they once again witnessed the spectacle of great armies passing back and forth through their territories, confiscating their grain, horses, and other supplies. This was just one more chapter in a depressingly familiar story of invasion and exploitation.²

An even grimmer second act soon followed, known as the Reign of Terror. In 1793 the Revolutionary government took a deadly turn under Robespierre and began lashing out at its own citizens, seeking revenge against suspected collaborators. The Committee of Public Safety announced that all "royalists and reactionaries" were to be killed. Revolutionary tribunals were installed throughout the country to weed out so-

¹ Sheehan 1989.

² Applegate 1990, p. 22.

called enemies of the state. During the Terror, from late 1793 through 1794, about 3,000 executions occurred in Paris, and 14,000 in the provinces. Trivial acts were considered treasonous. The victims included not only protestors, but also many farmers who were accused of crimes such as "food hoarding." Relatives of the condemned were targeted, and also those who spoke out against the executions. Young girls were beheaded for having danced with Prussian soldiers. One man was executed for shouting "*Vive le Roi.*" Merchants who sold materials of poor quality were considered to "lack faith" in the Revolutionary regime. A shop-keeper was beheaded for selling sour wine. A cobbler was executed for selling to the government "two pairs of shoes of poor quality, the soles of which were stuffed with old leather." A candle maker was guillotined for supplying the navy with candles made of turpentine and grease instead of wax, which only burned for 21 minutes instead of the prescribed 24 hours. Refusal to accept the "*assignats*" (revolutionary currency) at face value was punishable by death. Efforts to avoid conscription into the military were treasonous. A father was executed for trying to smuggle his 14 year old son out of the country to avoid military service. There were cases of prisoners being executed mistakenly because of clerical errors. Most of the executed were not nobles (they had already fled the country). About 85% of the victims came from the "Third Estate," that is, commoners and peasants.³

The Revolutionary tribunal hauled the guillotine from village to village in Alsace and the people watched helplessly as their leading citizens were publicly executed. As the slaughter accelerated, the revolutionaries declared their intention to kill all the "cowards and traitors" in Alsace who had supposedly collaborated with the allied armies. The loyalty of the Alsatians was suspect because of their German ethnicity. A representative of the government proposed that one-fourth of the population be guillotined and that the remainder should be driven out of the country and replaced by native French.⁴ This led to a mass panic, known as *La Grande Fuite* (the Great Flight) of 1793. Thousands of people throughout Alsace fled for safety across the Rhine, following the retreating armies of the German allies. This was one contemporary report:

Everybody fled, forsaking father, wife, children, and all their belongings. People fled without their clothes, the rich without their money, the mother without the baby to whom she had recently given birth. Entire villages became empty and deserted; the shops had no workers; the plows had no farm hands. All the roads leading to the Rhine were crowded with swarms of wretched, confused, and terror-stricken humanity. The Rhine crossing at Lauterburg was jammed by the mounting flood of refugees. Some women, in despair of reaching the other side, threw themselves with their infants into the river, so as not to fall into the hands of the ferocious revolutionaries.⁵

At least 40,000 people fled from Alsace during this period, mostly from the northern areas near Weissenbourg and Hagenau. Although the Pfalz was not yet formally annexed by France and its citizens could not be considered "treasonous," an

³ Hibbert 1980, p. 227; Greer 1935, p. 78.

⁴ Height 1972, p. 26.

⁵ Height 1972, p. 26.

estimated 30,000 people there also fled for safety and to avoid the pillaging of the French soldiers.

At first the refugees fled to the unoccupied regions of the Pfalz, but as the French armies advanced more people fled across the Rhine. Many were camped around Mannheim, where the authorities created emergency food kitchens and a hospital to help care for them. Refugees were scattered all the way from Heidelberg to Freiburg in the Black Forest. For the next few years bands of homeless people wandered about, attempting to filter across the river in any way possible to their homes. In 1794 about 10,000 people were reported to be waiting across the river from the crossing point at Germersheim to return to the Pfalz, and the number of Alsatians was much larger.

This mass evacuation of farms and estates, which in most cases was only a temporary safety measure by the people, presented the authorities with the opportunity to confiscate their property and to put it at the disposal of the State. The refugees were labeled as “emigres,” and detailed lists were drawn up of their property. Many farms and houses, including furniture and even clothing, were auctioned off by French officials at ridiculously low prices, sometimes given outright to supporters of the regime and to carpetbaggers who moved in to take advantage of the situation.

However, the huge number of refugees soon created a problem for the French. Over 75% of them were farmers and craftsmen, and the authorities had to devise a solution to provide for the needs of their army and to support the local economy. A partial amnesty was declared in January, 1795, for refugees who would return by March of that year. However, the amnesty applied only to those who “worked with their hands,” and they had to pay double taxes, as well as any costs incurred if their property had been confiscated or leased out by the authorities during their absence.⁶

In response, a flood of refugees attempted to cross the Rhine to reclaim their homes. The local bureaucrats and usurpers didn't wish to return their property, so they arranged to have the boats turned back at most crossing points. This deplorable situation wasn't finally resolved until 1799 under the Triumvirate, when all refugees were allowed to return.⁷ They were treated with hostility by the new landowners who had taken over their farms. To prevent mass starvation, the government allowed them to enter the lands after the harvest to glean whatever meager grain had been left behind.

The worst period for the *Pfälzers* was the “plunder winter” of 1793-94, memories of which still live in local tales about the horrors of those times. After the allies withdrew from the west bank late in 1793, the French formed a *Commission d'évacuation du Palatinat*, which implemented local “seizure commissions” (*Commissaires de Grippe*) to completely plunder the Pfalz. They carried this out so systematically and thoroughly that the word *gripsen* is still used in the local dialect to denote thievery.

The atrocities committed by the French soldiers during these early years of military occupation have been described in graphic detail by Blanning.⁸ French propaganda portrayed its armies as “liberators,” and they expected the German people to pay for this privilege. The officers demanded instant levies from the people under their control, and the amounts were often staggering. If the townspeople couldn't pay, the army simply confiscated what it wished. On one occasion when the villagers

⁶ Martin 1978, p. 77.

⁷ Height 1972, p. 29.

⁸ Blanning 1983.

protested, a Jacobine official responded, “everything belongs to us; all that will be left for you are eyes for weeping.”⁹ This was a contemporary report from Neustadt:

By decree of the welfare committee, the conquered lands must support the military. The superintendants wanted hostages selected among the wealthy and privileged and the aristocracy and the church officials, for the payment of war taxes. Horses, cattle, food supplies, fodder, linen, shirts, and anything else that wasn't necessary for the support of the army, should be sent to France. [The citizens of Neustadt were ordered to provide] ... 10,000 pairs of shoes, new or otherwise in good condition, 10,000 pairs of pants of any color, 20,000 shirts and 10,000 jackets or coats. In addition to these natural products, they also had to provide 4,000,000 *livres* in hard currency within one week.¹⁰

Another report from Speyer in 1794 states that 3,000 wagons were required to haul away the booty from their city. In order to discover any valuables that may have been buried in cellars and gardens, the *Sansculottes* poured water onto the ground and wherever it soaked in the fastest, they dug it up.

They broke open and emptied all the municipal funds, they forced the citizens to deliver on the spot requisitions of every kind, they looted, they vandalized a number of private houses, they imposed a levy of 400,000 *livres* in cash on pain of drastic penalties.

However crushing a demand of this kind, we strove to meet it, asking even our poorest citizens to give their all and to forgo all their necessities. We hoped to earn the goodwill of the Republic by the most docile observance of its orders.

Vain hopes! We were cruelly disillusioned by the sight of barbarious episodes, which soon followed...

[They] arranged for the emptying of all cellars, all granaries, and the seizing of all basic foodstuffs. Far from respecting at least the homes of the poor and the orphaned, they took all they possessed, right down to the bread in their mouths and the straw on their beds. They took all the bells, without exception; even those which sounded the hours were thrown down from the bell-towers. They took by force horses, livestock in general, goods lodged at the customs house, and from the shops: cloth, linen, groceries, leather, bedsteads, tin, copper, brass, tools of every kind, furniture, clothing. The windows of all the churches were broken on the order of the commissars; the interiors were vandalized; the organs dismantled; the lead from the steeples, the slates from the roofs, the wrought-iron work from the windows, doors, and staircases -- it was all torn out and taken away.¹¹

⁹ Height 1972, p. 27.

¹⁰ Cited in Thalmann 1981, p. 159.

¹¹ Cited in Blanning 1983, p. 117.

The Attack on the Roman Catholic Church

The Catholic Church, to which the majority of the French people belonged, had enjoyed a special status as the official state religion under previous French regimes. During the Revolution the Church therefore was subject to special attack. The first step by the Assembly was to terminate Catholicism as the religion of the State and to establish freedom of worship. In 1789, Protestants were declared eligible to serve in all offices and any of their possessions that had been seized were restored. In August, 1789, the Assembly decreed that the taxing power of the Church was terminated, all Church property in France was confiscated, and it began to be sold at public auctions. In July of 1790, the clergy were pronounced to be employees of the state, elected by their parish or bishopric, and the number of bishoprics was to be reduced. All priests and bishops were required to swear an oath of fidelity to the new government, or face dismissal, deportation or death. This law was made even more stringent in 1793, when it was ordained that all priests who refused to swear an oath of allegiance were subject to death on sight, as well as any persons who harboured them. In the occupied Pfalz, The French officials were also enforcing similar oaths of allegiance on the local people, under threat that if they refused they would be "treated as a conquered people." Catholic priests were outspoken critics of these enforced oaths, as well as vigorous protestors against the confiscation and sale of Church property. The Archbishop of Speyer threatened excommunication of anyone who purchased confiscated Church property. Supposedly, some priests even encouraged their parishioners to flee across the Rhine, although the comparative numbers available for Catholic emigres are not conclusive.¹²

Of all classes of persons victimized during the French Revolution -- aristocrats, peasants accused of hoarding, and so on -- the clergy of the Catholic Church suffered proportionately the greatest losses. Hundreds of clergy were murdered during periodic outbursts of violence that erupted. In 1792, during the September Massacres, three bishops and more than 200 priests were massacred by angry mobs. Priests were drowned, and at Lyon there were mass executions of priests and nuns. Hundreds more priests were imprisoned and kept in miserable conditions.

During the years of the Terror under Robespierre, a bizarre "Cult of the Supreme Being" was instituted by the State. It was touted as a "Cult of Reason," a rational belief system intended to replace all other religions, especially Catholicism, which was regarded as a relic of Medieval superstition. In 1793 all Catholic churches were closed and worship services were prohibited. In their place, a great celebration of the Goddess of Reason was held in Notre Dame Cathedral.

Rampant looting of churches and monasteries took place throughout France and in the occupied Pfalz in the early years of the Revolution. Statues, crucifixes, bells, and other overt signs of religious worship were destroyed. Religious practices were targets of ridicule and malicious behavior by the soldiers. There are many surviving first-hand descriptions of these times. In the Archbishopric of Speyer, the French used the cathedral as an ammunition magazine and storage warehouse, and they almost auctioned off the entire cathedral for a few thousand *francs*. They disrupted church services and where the organ had played *Te Deums*, the French frolicked to the tune of

¹² Martin 1978, p. 50.

the *Marseillaise*.¹³ Soldiers ridiculed the people when they celebrated religious feast days. They lit their pipes from the sacred candles, drank the communion wine, defecated into tabernacles, mutilated crucifixes, emptied the *ciborium* and trampled the Communion wafers on the ground, sometimes pinning them on their hats as decorations or feeding them to their horses. Statues of the Virgin were desecrated and sexually profaned. Some soldiers copulated with prostitutes inside the churches. The following is typical:

On the 12th of March 1794 a donkey was led through the streets in a kind of procession; on its head was placed a mitre bearing the motto: 'The ass is mightier than the Pope.' Dressed up in priestly vestments, the French waved incense over the rear quarters of the donkey (also clad in clerical robes), while shouting the most hair-raising blasphemies and abuse of the clergy. They even pretended -- oh, what a disgusting crime! -- to stuff the consecrated host into the donkey's anus. While this was going on, they kept up a frightful wailing from their hymn-books. First the procession went through the town, then out of the town through the *Kuhtor* [cattle gate] to the Rhine, where the donkey and his mitre were thrown into the river.¹⁴

By 1795 a return to church services was beginning to be tolerated. A law was passed in February, 1795, which legalized religious ceremonies inside churches, but all public processions and pilgrimages, the display of the cross, and the ringing of church bells were prohibited. Civil marriage was compulsory. All births, deaths, and marriages were officially recorded in the town halls by civil servants, rather than by priests. A new calendar was introduced, which omitted religious holidays and divided the week into ten day periods (*decades*). Sundays were replaced by secular days of rest, which occurred on the tenth day rather than on the seventh, stirring considerable resentment among the people.

By 1801 most of the property of the Catholic Church had been secularized and auctioned off to the highest bidders. Napoleon eventually agreed, in a Concordat with the Pope, to pay some restitution for lost church properties and local bishops were again allowed to celebrate the Mass in those churches that had not already been disposed of.

Napoleon's Grand Design for Europe

The early excesses of the Revolution and the Reign of Terror had largely run their course by 1795, and some semblance of order was restored under the Directorate. In 1799 the Triumvirate headed by Napoleon came to power. He officially pronounced that the Revolution was over, revolutionary laws were abolished and a new constitution was drafted.

The French National Assembly regarded the Rhine as the "natural boundary" for France to the east and it had no intention of ever abdicating control of this region. In 1797 Napoleon's armies defeated the Austrians near Vienna. At the Treaty of Campo

¹³ Stieler 1898.

¹⁴ Cited in Blanning 1983, p. 222.

Formio, in October, 1797, the Austrian Habsburgs ceded control of all the Rhinelands to France. That same year the Paris government took the first step toward wholesale annexation of the conquered territories. Four new *departements*, or administrative units, were created, the southernmost one being Mont-Tonnerre (Donnersberg), which included the Pfalz and areas around Mainz. At the peace of Luneville in February, 1801, all the new *departements* on the west bank were declared part of France, and they officially constituted the new border with the Holy Roman Empire. In 1802 the French constitution was extended to the region, an independent judiciary system was established in each town, and a new set of rights was proclaimed for the residents. Existing civil and criminal law codes were abolished, along with the old aristocracy, the town constitutions, and the guilds.

In 1804, with great pomp and splendor, Napoleon was crowned Emperor of the French and proclaimed the new Charlemagne. The Holy Roman Empire was formally dissolved on 6 August 1806 following a military defeat by the French. Napoleon reorganised much of the empire into the Confederation of the Rhine, a French satellite. He toyed with the notion of formally assuming the title of Holy Roman Emperor, but settled for the abdication of this title by Franz II in 1806, thus closing the final chapter on an institution that had survived for over one thousand years, since the time of Charlemagne.

Current historical research has unveiled the true extent of the exploitation of Europe that occurred during these years. Given the benefit of historical hindsight, it seems odd that there has been ongoing scholarly debate on this issue, which continues even today. The arrogant exploitation by the French during these years has often been obscured by an idealistic fascination with the “grandeur” of Napoleon. His deeds have been reinterpreted periodically by French historians to suit varying political climates.¹⁵ For a few decades after his fall, Napoleon was idolized and romanticized as a nostalgic symbol of France’s lost power. Bonapartism fell into disfavor in the 1850s and 1860s in reaction to the semi-dictatorial regime of Napoleon III. The tarnish was again removed from Napoleon's image after France’s defeat by the Prussians in 1870, when Bonaparte became a symbol of the French desire for revenge. Since the 1930s, with the work of historians such as George Lefebvre, a more objective view began to emerge of Napoleon's domination of the continent.

Even today, however, some historians -- and not all of them French -- diminish the gravity of this military hegemony by claiming that Napoleon did central Europe “a favor,” that he ushered in a new era of “democracy” and “modernized” Germany by eliminating the old feudal regimes. It has been argued that France was so politically advanced over the rest of Europe that it was the “duty” of Frenchmen to speed the evolution of the continent by their “benevolent” rule.¹⁶ The Holy Roman Empire is depicted as corrupt, inept, and long overdue for its demise. The mood of the German masses under French domination is often distorted and the so-called popular enthusiasm for “liberation” is exaggerated. The skeptic will note that there are striking parallels with the arguments once used by the Soviets to justify the excesses during the Russian Revolution and their ensuing domination of Eastern Europe. In both cases we find that a bloody revolution occurred, the nobility were obliterated, the leading farmers

¹⁵ Geyl 1949.

¹⁶ Wright 1974, p. 80.

were executed for “food hoarding,” the same mystique of world conquest disguised as “liberation” was promulgated, a similar power struggle developed between the “Red” Terror under Robespierre followed by a “White” Terror under the Directorate, and exploitative dictatorial rule was imposed on Europe.

The French historian Lefebvre challenged the popular imagery and offered a revisionist assessment. Napoleon’s blind ambition had betrayed the French people and the ideals of the Revolution, and he led the country on a collective path of mass destruction. Lefebvre pointed out that the much vaunted Napoleonic Code, which supposedly ushered in an era of legal equality, was a hypocrisy because it was applied differently in the subjugated territories. After Napoleon seized the estates of the clergy and the nobility he was irresistibly tempted to continue levying feudal tithes on the peasants, since these tithes were the primary reason why the estates had value. Feudal lords were simply replaced with Napoleon’s own appointees, or in many cases he continued to use the same nobility to administer the subjugated realms in his name. After Napoleon conquered Lombardy, Milan, Parma, Tuscany, and the Papal States in 1796, he turned Italy into his personal plaything. Napoleon and his key generals emerged as wealthy men from the Italian campaign due to the vast sums that they expropriated and extorted from the various regional governments. In both Italy and in the Rhineland art treasures were systematically looted from churches, museums, and private estates and sent back to Paris for display in the Louvre. He installed his brother Jerome as ruler of Westphalia, and urged him to use ruthless punishment if the people objected to his rule. In short, Napoleon’s empire has been denounced as a vast “criminal enterprise” headed by a man who in his character and methods was a great “*capo mafioso*.”¹⁷

A Revised View of the Holy Roman Empire

Along with the revision of Napoleon’s hegemony over Europe, some historians have also challenged the common view that the Holy Roman Empire was a backward, obsolete and socially stunted social institution, which was mercifully laid to rest by the hand of Napoleon, the great “modernizer.” Research since the 1960s has reevaluated this stereotype, and in the process new ground was broken in our understanding of the nature of the Holy Roman Empire.¹⁸

Blanning¹⁹ has done a thorough job of exploding the myth that the people in the Rhineland were “liberated” under French rule. He also challenges the stereotype that the Holy Roman Empire was a dysfunctional and anachronistic remnant of feudalism. Within the territories in the Empire the lifestyles of the people had changed markedly by the 1700s. Serfdom had been abolished in most areas and replaced by a system of tenant farming and limited contracts of indentureship (the *Leibeigenen* were being replaced by *Heuerlinge*). With the growth of cities as commercial centers, organized labor had become extremely powerful through the guild system. Social welfare institutions and charities were well developed in the late 1700s -- orphanages, geriatric homes, hospitals, poor houses, asylums, more humane prisons, state granaries for periods of famine, and

¹⁷ Schroeder 1990, p. 343.

¹⁸ Wilson 1993, Strauss 1978.

¹⁹ Blanning 1982.

so on. The nobility regularly gave alms and the monasteries had a traditional obligation to feed the poor. States such as the Pfalz were considerably more tolerant of religious diversity by that point than was France, which had promoted a monolithic state Catholicism during the old regime, and which was openly anti-religious during the Revolutionary years.²⁰

Wegert²¹ attacks “old clichés” that the people of the Holy Roman Empire in the late 18th century were locked in the grip of “mute obedience, popular quietude, and inflexible authority.” He documents that it would be more accurate to characterize western Germany, especially the Rhineland, as being in a dynamic and protracted period of jostling for power at the local level. There were numerous instances of civil unrest by the lower middle-class urban *Bürgerschaft*. Guild members vigorously protected their rights and trade monopolies (e.g., the *Knoten-Revolution* in Mainz in 1790). Such conflicts were so common that the 18th century has been referred to as the “age of the journeymen’s rebellion.” There were also numerous instances of protest by local peasantry against corrupt and unjust local officials, unfair taxes, and so on. More often than not the ruling elites were forced to negotiate to preserve order, and this civil unrest resulted in constitutional improvements for the citizenry.

In sum, Wegert proposes that once we are “freed from the hypnotic effect of Jacobin ideals,” it becomes possible to recognize the German *ancien régime* in a more positive light. The Holy Roman Empire had survived since the days of Charlemagne not as a fossilized anachronism, but rather it had evolved into a loose, regionally diverse framework with an elaborate set of checks and balances which prevented any party, including the Emperor, from gaining too much power. In contrast to other countries, such as France and England, which had become more rigidly centralized, the broad social fabric of the Holy Roman Empire tolerated a multitude of “home town” governments which had great autonomy and latitude to resolve local issues, and they jealously guarded their prerogatives. If left alone, the local traditions of communalism and pluralism that were so much a part of German society would have evolved into a system similar to the Swiss model.²²

Wegert characterizes the French as “spoilers” of this long and dynamic social evolution that was taking place in German territories in the 18th century. Despite Jacobin propaganda about liberation, after the arrival of French troops in 1792 they forcibly stifled any expressions of civil discontent. The collapse of the Holy Roman Empire and the ensuing incorporation of the many small towns and territories into larger political units under French control effectively short-circuited the ability to resolve issues at the local level.²³

Viewed in this light, it should be no surprise that the great majority of Germans did not greet the march of the French armies with enthusiasm. Rather than feeling oppressed by the Holy Roman Empire, as some historians alleged, the great majority of the German people under French domination yearned for its reinstatement. Jacobin political clubs had formed in some German cities, primarily Mainz, Worms, and Speyer, spearheaded by “a very small number of enthusiastic German reformers” and

²⁰ Wilson 1993.

²¹ Wegert 1981.

²² Walker 1971; Strauss 1978.

²³ Wegert, 1981, p. 462.

intellectuals who were initially dazzled by the mystique of the Revolution.²⁴ Once the realities of military hegemony became apparent, many were disillusioned and they became a focal point for nationalist resistance.

The regime of *Kurfürst* Karl Theodor, who died in 1799, was regarded with nostalgia by many *Pfälzers*. As one contemporary observer noted:

The trans-Rhine people seem to have the opinion that the lumpen-fighters of the French Republic impose much harder demands than the [former] Pfalz officials.²⁵

The French systematically proceeded to annex the entire west bank of the Rhine. In 1793 they issued annexation decrees that unilaterally severed 32 villages in the south Pfalz from the Holy Roman Empire. They also tried to engineer consent among the occupied peoples for further annexations. Elections were ordered for new municipal governments throughout the west bank of the Rhine, in preparation for a national convention to be held in Mainz to rubber-stamp their acceptance of French rule. Male citizens could not vote unless they swore an oath of loyalty to Jacobine principles of "freedom and equality." There was enthusiasm among some Jacobine intellectuals for a "Mainz Republic," but to their utter dismay and that of the French, most Rhinelanders refused:

Brow-beating, threats of heavy taxation and of village burnings did little to motivate Mainz citizens or Palatinate townsmen to accept the proffered ideals. In the countryside the people occasionally tried to bribe the soldiers sent in to administer the oath, as in Edesheim where this strategy cost the town twenty *Louis d'or* daily. In Winnweiler the electoral commissioner was captured and his escort of forty *Chasseurs* sent fleeing to choruses of 'Long live the Emperor, to Hell with the French!' A petition submitted to the French by Speyer citizens in which they emphasized that they were quite content to retain their present constitution and their 'popularly elected authority' summarized the prevailing sentiment nicely.²⁶

²⁴ Wegert, 1981, p. 460.

²⁵ Cited in Hartkopf 1989.

²⁶ Citation from Wegert 1981, p. 461. Thalman 1981, p. 158 tries to put a positive gloss on these forced elections by characterizing them as "the first modern elections on German soil." This, however, ignores the fact that municipal elections for members of the city councils were a widespread practice throughout the Holy Roman Empire long before the French conquest. Wegert 1981 notes that in Mainz, which was a center of Jacobine enthusiasm, only about 375 out of an eligible population of 10,000 swore the oath. Landau was the sole major exception at that time. This city, located in the heart of the Pfalz, had been occupied and formally annexed by the French in the late 17th century. The French wanted to hold it as a strategic bastion near the doorstep of the Alsatian border. Louis XIV commissioned his architects to redesign the city, and it was fortified with elaborate walls and moats. Over time the Landauers came to think of themselves as citizens of France rather than of the Empire. When the Revolution occurred in 1789, many citizens enthusiastically joined the local Jacobine club.

In some villages, such as Insheim, the citizens did indeed vote to accept the French Constitution in 1799, but the proclamation that was read by officials before the election made the consequences of a negative vote very clear:

The French regime, in the spirit of the great and noble principles of the Republican Constitution, has the fervent desire that the conquered lands, whose territories are proclaimed to be eternally united with the Republic, should be allowed, as soon as possible, to participate in all the advantages of this Constitution. In order to be allowed to participate, the residents themselves must first solemnly and firmly express their common desire for the final unification with the great Nation. In the event that this doesn't happen, the regime can only, with the best of will, regard and treat the blessed slopes of the Rhine, the Maas and the Mosel, as conquered lands...²⁷

The Economic Impact of the French Occupation

Beneath the smoke-screen of "liberation" the true nature of the conquest was soon revealed to the Rhinelanders. The National Assembly decreed that France would forcibly liberate all of Europe and the masses had to pay for this privilege by supporting the occupation armies. The Jacobins regarded this as a "modest price for liberty."²⁸ This rhetoric was a thin disguise for massive expropriation of resources and exploitation of the people. These deprivations were claimed to be only temporary due to the demands of the wars; however, the wars simply accelerated under Napoleon.

Some historians have claimed that Europe benefited economically from the forcible integration of the continent under Napoleon, and that trade blossomed from the removal of tariff barriers. This could potentially have happened, as when the states of southern Germany were united into the Confederation of the Rhine. In reality, such an economic boom didn't occur because the French government instituted a new structure of trade barriers and tariffs to transform Europe into their economic colony, to reduce it to a passive market for the export of French manufactured goods. This program ostensibly began as an attempt to blockade France against England, which at that time was the world's premier industrial power. The National Assembly threatened to imprison anyone caught owning or using British goods, or even wearing clothing made in England. In 1806 trade embargos were expanded by Napoleon into the "Continental System," which included all of Europe. This grandiose scheme was designed to transform Europe into a vast sealed market, with France replacing England as dominator of the trade. Napoleon clearly stated his policy:

My fundamental principle is, France first and foremost (*la France avant tout*). You must never lose sight of the fact that if English trade triumphs on the seas it is because the English are the strongest there. It is reasonable, therefore, that as France is the strongest on land, French trade should also triumph there.²⁹

²⁷ Cited in Fritz 1982.

²⁸ Wegert, 1981, p. 462.

²⁹ Cited in Heckscher, 1964, p. 297.

Schroeder³⁰ has described the Continental System as “anti-economic” from the ground up, little more than a “vast experiment in colonialism.” The effect of the trade restrictions imposed by the Continental System was destructive for the industry and commerce of most countries in Europe. The port cities of Hamburg, Bremen, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Antwerp, as well as all of the Hanseatic cities on the Baltic, were entirely dependent on foreign trade and they suffered greatly. The chief industrial regions such as the Grand Duchy of Berg (the Ruhr valley in Germany) and Switzerland experienced major economic depressions. Even agricultural areas were hard hit by loss of their overseas markets.

Beneath the protectionist umbrella, certain French industries blossomed during these years. The chemicals industry expanded to compensate for the shortages of products such as dyes and indigo. The scarcity of sugar in Europe stimulated a rapid growth of sugar beet farming in France. A huge network of commercial spies was maintained throughout southern Germany to ensure that these countries did not erect tariff barriers or otherwise prevent the transport of French goods throughout Europe. To facilitate the intrusion of French goods into the European market, the centuries-old commercial ties of Switzerland and southern Germany with Italy were cut, and Italy was reduced to economic dependency. Economic barriers were created to prevent Italy from buying manufactured goods from any country but France, and most of its raw materials (such as raw silk) could be exported only to France. In this fashion France developed monopolies to strengthen its industries at the expense of other countries which were supposed to benefit from the Continental System.

It was impossible to police such a vast area and smuggling became rampant. Napoleon realized that he could not maintain an airtight embargo and that customs revenue was simply being lost to the smugglers. Therefore in 1809 he began revising the policies in an attempt to regain an advantage for France. At first he simply coerced corrupt customs officials to pay large sums to his personal account -- boasting that he would be able to build a handsome estate out of these revenues at no personal expense.³¹ Then he decided that stolen British goods could be resold openly in France if a tariff of 40% of their value was paid. Finally, by the end of 1810 certain British goods were allowed to enter France under the condition that they were traded equally for French goods (no deficit would result) and also the transport had to be done on French ships.

In this fashion, France became a middleman for British goods on the continent.³² The charade of maintaining a continental embargo was dropped and the true nature of the French trade policy was exposed as an effort to supplant British domination of the European market with a captive consumer outlet for French industry. In order to achieve this goal, internal markets on the continent were disrupted and external competition was blocked as much as possible -- or at least regulated so that France could reap the benefits from the unquenchable demand for British goods.

What impact did French occupation have on the Rhinelands? This region had been annexed by France in 1797, so theoretically the Pfalz should have enjoyed great economic growth under protectionist French policies at the expense of the other

³⁰ Schroeder 1990, pp. 385-393.

³¹ Heckscher 1964, p. 204.

³² Heckscher 1964.

subjugated countries. Some historians have in fact alleged that the period from 1792 to 1814 was an economic success in the Rhinelands. Blanning,³³ however, concludes that throughout the region the negative effects far outweighed the positive. The only major exception was Strasbourg, which was the French administrative center along the Rhine and it benefited from the Continental System. Strasbourg stands out in stark contrast with other communities on the west bank.³⁴

All communities on the west bank of the Rhine, both urban and rural, were used as a source of revenue to support the faltering government in Paris, and the Rhinelands bore the brunt of military occupation longer than any other area of Europe. Until 1798 all of the old Imperial tithes and taxations were left intact and simply taken over by the French generals and to fill their own coffers and support their armies. After this they instituted a new taxation system which was greatly more exploitative than it had ever been under the Holy Roman Empire. In addition the population had to bear other burdens, such as being forcibly conscripted for labor duty to construct roads and military fortifications.

The economy on the west bank was also undermined by the nearly worthless paper currency (*assignats*) issued in great quantity by the National Assembly, which the people were forced to accept at par as payment for expropriated goods and supplies. This was essentially a form of legalized looting. *Assignats* were initially worth only 8% of their face value and by 1795 they had shrunk to 1/1000 in value. Then, in an effort to stabilize the currency, a new form was introduced that year known as *mandats territoriaux*, which also depreciated rapidly to only 1% of face value. The people would accept only metal coins in their daily transactions with each other. Even beggars, it was reported, refused to accept paper currency.³⁵ Although the occupation armies paid for the supplies they requisitioned with paper notes, the populace had to pay their taxes in hard currency (coinage) or in-kind (such as grain or supplies). In this fashion the wealth was eventually siphoned off into the Republic's coffers. After persistent protest, the people were allowed to pay their tax levies partly in currency and partly in-kind. The currency remained unstable until 1803, when Napoleon introduced the *franc*.

Often the villagers protested that they didn't have enough money or supplies to meet the amounts demanded. If a village fell into arrears, 50 French troops would be billeted there and the families had to support them until the debt was paid. The practice of billeting soldiers in private homes was common in the Rhinelands. French officers often brought their wives and families, with a complete entourage of servants, all of whom had to be supported by the host villages. During the 1790s the Rhinelands had to support an occupying force that, together with its dependents, totalled at least a quarter of a million people.³⁶ Throughout the lengthy period of military campaigns, the Rhinelands were the major supplier of the French armies, more so than any other area under French jurisdiction. Since the army was irregularly paid by Paris, soldiers frequently resorted to looting to take what they needed.

The disruption of the ancient trade routes in the Rhine valley led to collapse of the markets for cattle, grain and other food products in the Pfalz, as well as outlets for

³³ Blanning 1982, p. 150.

³⁴ Silverman 1972, p. 10.

³⁵ Herold, 1963.

³⁶ Sheehan 1989, p. 55.

manufactured goods. After the west bank was annexed in 1797 the protective market barrier surrounding the borders of France was extended to the Rhine, and all commercial contacts with communities on the east bank of the river were cut off. In addition, all down-river trade with the Netherlands was rigorously controlled to cut off their markets with England. This, of course, brought the economy to a virtual stand still. Rather than being a “natural boundary” of France, as had been argued by French philosophes of the 18th century, the Rhine was in reality the place where trade networks converged. The Rhine was (and is) the major artery for western Germany and Alsace, linking the lowlands countries with markets throughout the Holy Roman Empire. The French intended to replace these ancient market networks with new markets oriented to the interior of France. The difficulty was that, rhetoric to the contrary, the real geographic boundaries lay to the west, with the Vosges mountains which cut Alsace and the Pfalz off from France, and which had marked the natural linguistic frontier for over a thousand years. The majority of the population in Alsace has always been clustered in a rather narrow plain, on the average only about 12 miles wide, separating the foothills of the Vosges from the left bank of the Rhine. At that time few roads cut across this natural barrier, and no rivers flowed in that direction to conduct commercial traffic.

The cities were hit especially hard since their economies focused on the production of exports, textiles, and luxury goods, and most of these markets were disrupted. By 1799 the number of beggars in the Pfalz skyrocketed and there was no way to meet their needs. The thousands of French soldiers in permanent occupation also led to rampant prostitution.³⁷ The rural villages were also devastated economically, although perhaps not as severely as the cities since they could still function at a reduced subsistence level. In Frankenthal, just south of Worms in the Pfalz, farmers had to be restrained by military force to prevent them from trading their potato crop with communities on the east bank of the Rhine in 1800. They had already plowed under their onion crop due to the prohibition of trade across the Rhine, and the potato crop was their last hope to avoid being reduced to complete poverty. In 1802 both the cattle and the grain markets collapsed in the Pfalz, with two-thirds of the harvest left unsold due to the loss of outlets. As late as 1810 the French governor of the Pfalz was complaining that the trade with the interior of France was “zero.”³⁸ The only remaining major outlet for the once thriving *Pfälzer* communities was to meet the needs of the military, but this outlet was exploitative since the military conscripted what it required and compensated for it at low rates. There were a few scattered pockets of economic growth in cities to the north, which resulted from the cut in iron ore from the Ruhr and the textile imports from the east side of the Rhine.³⁹ The Pfalz, being an agricultural area, did not share in those benefits. These few pockets of growth in the Rhinelands were also soon eclipsed by a major economic depression from 1810 to 1812, which began in France and was felt even more strongly in the occupied satellite areas.

An additional assault on the social fabric of the German towns occurred when the traditional guilds came under attack. The French authorities issued a flood of trade licenses to virtually anyone who applied to open shop in a town, in defiance of old guild

³⁷ Blanning 1983.

³⁸ Blanning 1983, p. 141.

³⁹ Heckscher 1964.

regulations.⁴⁰ In some areas the guilds were abolished outright. The rationale was that the guilds were fossils of feudalism that propped up class privileges, they were as outmoded as the Holy Roman Empire, and they hampered economic growth. For centuries, however, the guilds had played an essential role in the carefully managed system of controlled competition in the local economies. At that point when the markets were depressed, the removal of guild protectionism was simply another source of misery for many of the people.

Military Conscription

Still another form of oppression during the Napoleonic years, one which proved to be beyond endurance for many families, was the conscription of their young men. Under Napoleon the military campaigns in the east escalated, and his appetite for new troops was insatiable. In 1805 he waged war against Austria (the War of the Third Coalition), in 1806-1807 against Prussia and Russia, again in 1809 against Austria, and in 1812 he began a fruitless invasion of Russia that soon involved all the countries in Europe, eventuating in Napoleon's downfall in 1814.

By the late 18th century warfare had become highly formalized and its aims were limited. Most armies were fairly small, composed primarily of highly trained and well disciplined professional soldiers. Military engagements were conducted like chess maneuvers, with the goal of placing one's regiments in an advantageous position. When one side eventually recognized its unfavorable position, it typically disengaged and negotiated a withdrawal to avoid a mass slaughter.⁴¹

In order to defeat these battle-tested opponents, in 1793 the French ushered in an entirely new style of warfare for which the other nations of Europe were not prepared. The French National Assembly formed a vast civilian army, declaring a "*levee en masse*." All unmarried men from the ages of 18 to 40 were eligible for conscription, excluding widowers with children. Between 1800 and 1815 a total of 2,543,357 men were mobilized, the majority through conscription. Although the conscripts were supposed to serve five year terms of duty, in practice their discharges were delayed due to the seemingly endless military campaigns. The massive size and the high morale of the French army largely accounted for their victories in the early years because their tactics were not yet well organized. Under Napoleon their battle tactics became refined, but their morale began to drop due to the staggering casualty rates suffered in Napoleon's campaigns. Desertions increased and thousands mutilated themselves to avoid conscription. Marriages also skyrocketed in order to gain exemption from duty. The entire family, village, or community was held responsible if a conscript escaped.⁴²

Napoleon's battle tactics also took a high toll from the local populations that were within a theater of conflict. He used a strategy of rapid deployment, force-marching his armies over great distances and launching attacks before the enemy was prepared. This meant that the vast French armies were often poorly supplied since they could not always be encumbered by baggage trains. It was a matter of military policy

⁴⁰ Walker 1971.

⁴¹ Rothenberg 1978.

⁴² Koch, 1985 p. 58.

that they should live off the land, taking whatever supplies they needed from the local population. Each corps was allocated a specific “foraging sector” in order to efficiently confiscate supplies. In contrast, the armies of the Austrians and Prussians had well developed supply trains, so they had less need to exploit the lands through which they moved. The Austrian armies also paid for the supplies that they conscripted, in glaring contrast to the French, who often simply took what they needed, or paid with worthless currency.⁴³

The conquered peoples had to pay part of the burden of their own “liberation” by providing young men to slake the unquenchable thirst of the French military for manpower. France had instituted a *levee en masse* in 1793, and this obligation was extended to the newly annexed *departements* in the Rhinelands and Belgium in 1802. Each *departement* was levied a quota of soldiers that had to be selected from their ranks and equipped at the expense of the local communities. These soldiers were merged directly into the French regiments and they constituted about one-fourth of the French army.⁴⁴ As the numbers topped out in 1808, exemptions were granted for married men, sons of widows and brothers of those already conscripted. Wealthier persons could hire a replacement for themselves or for their own eligible sons. Napoleon’s wars had become never ending by 1813, so these exemptions were eliminated and even those with physical disabilities were drafted. The Prussians, Austrians, and vassal German states which had been welded into the Confederation of the Rhine in 1806 each provided separate regiments of their conscripts under their own commanders and flags (Herold, 1963). Napoleon's *Grand Armee* that marched against Russia in 1812 consisted of about 500,000 soldiers. Only about one-third of the army was French.⁴⁵ The remainder consisted of various German contingents, as well as tributary soldiers from all the multitude of conquest states within Napoleon's new world order -- Italy, Poland, Holland, Belgium, Dalmatia, Illyria, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, and so on.⁴⁶ The French forces had dwindled to about 100,000 men by September, 1812, when they reached Moscow. After enduring a vicious winter and constant guerrilla attacks, the *Grande Armee* struggled back out of Russia with only 10,000 men. By 1813 there was a high rate of desertion among the draftees from the Pfalz because they didn’t want to fight other Germans, and when the armies of the allies (Prussian and Russian) pushed the French back across the Rhine many *Pfälzer* soldiers joined their ranks.⁴⁷

⁴³ Rothenberg 1978.

⁴⁴ Rothenberg 1978, p. 135.

⁴⁵ Herold 1963, p. 168.

⁴⁶ Thompson 1963; Rothenberg 1978.

⁴⁷ Thalmann 1981.