French History, 2024, **38**, 214–231
https://doi.org/10.1093/fh/crad053
Advance access publication 8 January 2024
Article

A peacetime battleground: national symbols, patriotism and prestige in the French-occupied Rhineland, 1920–23

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ABSTRACT

Tensions and violence were central to the French interwar occupation of the Rhineland. This article examines symbolic opposition and violence carried out by locals, as perceived by the French authorities, mainly involving attacks on flags, singing banned patriotic songs, or displaying German patriotic colours. Although rarer than physical violence, the ways in which French officials documented and responded to such incidents allow for an insight into the mindset of the French occupiers. The victorious but sensitive French were especially concerned with notions of prestige, dignity and authority, drawing on colonial ideas, and quick to punish attacks on symbols of French power. Even during the beginning of the organized 'passive resistance' campaign in 1923, French authorities were as concerned with songs and flags as with demonstrations and physical violence. French sensitivity around national symbols betrayed deeper insecurities and uncertainties regarding their role both in the occupied territory and the wider world.

In the wake of the First World War, French soldiers and civilians occupied the industrial Rhineland region on Germany's western border. For over ten years, French occupiers lived alongside their former enemy as victors learning to respond to—or deal with—the local population. Of course, France had been no stranger to the phenomenon of occupation during the war, when ten *départements* of northern France were partially or fully occupied by the Germans.[1] This was partly why before and during the early months of occupation, French soldiers alluded to enacting revenge in the Rhineland.[2] Yet the French, Belgian, British and American presence

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1 Philippe Nivet, *La France occupée, 1914–1918* (Paris, 2011), 9.

2 Bruno Cabanes, *La Victoire endeuillée: la sortie de guerre des soldats français, 1918–1920* [2004] (Paris, 2014), 85–87, 202–04.

here represented a different phenomenon, a peacetime occupation starting in December 1918 as a means of enforcing the Armistice, then formalized as a means of guaranteeing German adherence to the Treaty of Versailles.[3] Excellent scholarship has been published outlining the multifaceted French role in this occupation. Works written in French and English have examined a few key topics. First, the semi-official attempt to encourage a separate Rhenish identity or buffer state in the first years of occupation, linked to the cultural policy of 'peaceful penetration'.[4] Secondly, the Rhineland's importance for French economic and diplomatic policies, including the controversial Franco–Belgian extension of the occupation to the Ruhr (1923–25) in reaction to German non-payment of reparations.[5] Others have examined the experience of soldiers at the beginning of the occupation, and, most studied of all, the French use of and German response to colonial troops.[6] Benedikt Neuwöhner's recent review of mostly German scholarship echoes these themes, whilst outlining later developments concerning occupied–occupier relations in the French zone. Yet he considers the occupation to be under-studied, arguing for further exploration.[7] Nicolas Beaupré has also provided a summary of similar historiographical trends in English, French and German publications, as well as of the occupation as a whole. He correctly concludes that the Rhineland occupation was more than just a 'cold war', comprising (on the ground at least) 'a continuation of the Great War by other means'.[8]

One recurring theme across the disparate historiography reinforcing Beaupré's argument is that of tensions and violence. This occupation involved hundreds of incidents of physical violence between French and Germans, with French troops killing, wounding or sexually assaulting dozens of German civilians, and German civilians killing and physically assaulting dozens of French troops and civilians.[9] As Beaupré emphasizes, the French were especially guilty of excessive violence against Germans in the Ruhr in February–March and June–July 1923 where they used 'state violence' such as requisitions, expulsions, imprisonment and armed repression of strikes.[10] These measures were a response to Germans' 'passive resistance', an explicitly anti-French policy set out by Chancellor Wilhelm Cuno in January 1923 to bring international

3 Nicolas Beaupré, 'Occuper l'Allemagne après 1918', *Revue historique des armées*, 254 (2009), 9–19 <http://rha.revues.org/6333>.

4 Jean-Yves Le Naour, *1919–1921: Sortir de la guerre* (Paris, 2020), 106–34; Joachim Schröder and Alexander Watson, 'Occupation during and after the War (Germany)', in *1914–1918-online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, eds Ute Daniel et al., trans. Christophe Reid (Berlin, 2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10925>; Peter Collar, *The Propaganda War in the Rhineland: Weimar Germany, Race and Occupation after World War I* (London, 2013); Florian Godefroy, *Accepter l'occupation: l'enseignement du français par les autorités d'occupation à Mayence. (1918–1930)* (Great Britain, 2019); Paul Tirard, *L'Art français en Rhénanie pendant l'occupation, 1918–1930* (Strasbourg, 1930).

5 Conan Fischer, *The Ruhr Crisis, 1923–1924* (Oxford, 2003); Stanislas Jeannesson, 'French policy in the Rhineland', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 16 (2005), 475–86; Stanislas Jeannesson, *Poincaré, la France et la Ruhr, 1922–1924: histoire d'une occupation* (Strasbourg, 1998).

6 Cabanes, *Victoire*; Gilles Krugler, 'Allemagne, décembre 1918: les premières heures de l'occupation', *Revue historique des armées*, 254 (2009), 1–6 <http://journals.openedition.org/rha/6612>; Collar, *Propaganda War*; Jean-Yves Le Naour, *La Honte noire: l'Allemagne et les troupes coloniales françaises, 1914–1945* (Saint Amand-Montrond, 2003); John Boonstra, 'Women's honour and the black shame: coloured Frenchmen and respectable comportment in the post-World War I occupied Rhineland', *German History*, 33 (2015), 546–69; Christelle Gomis, 'Les Troupes coloniales françaises et l'occupation de la Rhénanie (1918–1930)', *Sens public* (2014), <http://sens-public.org/articles/1076/>; Julia Roos, 'Nationalism, racism and propaganda in early Weimar Germany: contradictions in the campaign against the "black horror on the Rhine"', *German History*, 30 (2012), 45–74; Julia Roos, 'Racist hysteria to pragmatic rapprochement? The German debate about Rhenish "occupation children", 1920–30', *Contemporary European History*, 22 (2013), 155–80; Erika Kuhlman, 'The Rhineland horror campaign and the aftermath of war', in *Aftermaths of War: Women's Movements and Female Activists, 1918–1923*, eds Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe (Leiden, 2011), 89–110.

7 Benedikt Neuwöhner, *Britannia Rules the Rhine: die Britische Rheinlandbesatzung 1918–1926* (Leiden, 2023), 4–10.

8 Beaupré, 'Occuper'.

9 Beaupré, 'Occuper'; Nicolas Beaupré, *Histoire franco–allemande: le traumatisme de la Grande Guerre, 1918–1933* (Lille, 2012), 166; Sabine Kienitz, 'Tantôt Ami, tantôt ennemi: les relations franco–allemandes durant l'occupation de la rive gauche du Rhin après 1918', in *La Construction de l'ennemi*, eds Reinhard Johler, Freddy Raphael and Patrick Schmoll (Strasbourg, 2009), 271; Cabanes, *Victoire*, 244–61.

10 Beaupré, 'Occuper'; Beaupré, *Histoire*, 166.

opinion onto the side of Germans.[11] In practice, this meant workers and administrators in the occupied territories should refuse to work for the occupiers or comply with their instructions, including via strikes and demonstrations; the policy was followed by many although officially ended in late 1923. On top of this, French soldiers, especially colonial troops, were accused of sexual and other violence, with Rhinelanders and other Germans running the *Schwarze Schmach* ('Black Shame') propaganda campaign from 1920 to 1923.[12] Real and perceived French violence therefore encouraged opposition from locals, which itself seemed to inform further instances of French violence. All this is why, for historian Sabine Kienitz, violence between occupier and occupied comprised a form of cultural contact, a way of affirming national identities and understanding the situation of occupation, or making it understood.[13]

This article will build on these ideas by focussing on symbolic forms of opposition and violence carried out by locals, as perceived by the French authorities, and what these tell us about French understandings of both their own role as occupiers and Rhinelanders' behaviour. It is based on an examination of c. 5,000 of pages of documents from the archives of the Haute Commission interalliée des territoires rhénans (HCITR), categorized as 'Incidents between the troops and the population' from 1919 until 1923; I have chosen the cut-off point of 1923 because the Ruhr occupation fundamentally changed the dynamic of opposition and local behaviour in the Rhineland, something I will expand upon later. The archival material examined includes letters between French civilian and military authorities, military reports, gendarme investigations and translations of relevant German sources. Such documents offer a top-down, official and ultimately French view of the situation in the Rhineland; there is, naturally, a German perspective that is equally worthy of investigation, but that is not the goal of this article. What is the goal is an examination of the way national symbols—especially flags, national colours and songs—became a means through which to assert French power and, for Rhinelanders, to challenge it. 'Incidents' with such symbols at their heart were rarer than instances of physical violence at least until 1923: a total of no more than two dozen symbolic incidents took place, as opposed to hundreds of cases of physical violence. However, when the former did occur, the ways in which French officials documented and responded to them is telling, informing my key argument: at least some French occupiers drew on notions of prestige, dignity and authority as critical aspects of both occupation and being victors, and which therefore had to be defended as thoroughly as possible. The article begins with a brief outline of the pre-eminent status of France in the occupied Rhineland and of France's position as an insecure victor, which provided the bedrock for sensitivity about national symbols. The second section engages with existing scholarship on national symbols and domination during this occupation, before offering a deeper examination of flags as a key area of contestation, and considering how symbolic and physical violence could overlap. I then reflect on notions of 'prestige' and suggest that this concept, with its colonial links, aids understanding of French attitudes in the Rhineland regarding national symbols. The article ends by examining how the beginnings of German 'passive resistance' reinforced the focus on symbolic affronts to France, even when opposition was becoming more varied, physical and explicit. Ultimately, whilst France and the Allies dominated the occupied Rhineland militarily, French sensitivity around national symbols betrayed a deeper insecurity and uncertainty regarding their role both in the occupied territory and the wider world.

11 Major B. T. Reynolds, 'A review of the occupation of the Rhineland', *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs*, 73 (1928), 207; Schröder and Watson, 'Occupation'; Fischer, *Ruhr*, 31.

12 See Footnote 9 of this article.

13 Sabine Kienitz, 'L'Occupation française et la construction culturelle des différences nationales dans le Palatinat de 1918 à 1930', *Histoire et sociétés: revue européenne d'histoire sociale*, 17 (2006), 32–43.

I

From the outset, the French played the central role amongst the occupiers. From 10 January 1920 until its end in June 1930, the occupation was overseen by the HCITR and its high commissioner, Frenchman Paul Tirard, who had run the temporary administrative organization in the Rhineland from 22 December 1918.[14] Before this, he 'had acquired considerable experience in building administrations in the Protectorate of Morocco and the recovered Alsace–Lorraine'.[15] The HCITR established its headquarters in Koblenz, the administrative capital of the Prussian Rhineland since 1815.[16] The British and Belgians also had high commissioners (the Americans did not as they never ratified the peace treaty), and HCITR policy was arrived at between all three, but Tirard had the deciding vote.[17] Whilst France therefore did not have complete freedom to follow its own agenda in the Rhineland, Tirard pursued a civilizing mission, 'to establish France, her values and spirit in the Rhineland' which, alongside his desire for a separate Rhenish state, is why he invested so much energy into 'peaceful penetration', involving the promotion of French art, culture and language.[18] It is also why, on the very first day that the HCITR took control, he made his desire to avoid tensions explicit, noting:

> The High Commission hopes that contact between the troops of the allied nations and the Rhenish people will prove, not a source of friction, but a means of the various nations becoming better acquainted, and of progressing, in the union of labor, order and peace, toward the future of a better humanity.[19]

Unsurprisingly, such idealistic goals were rarely achieved, exacerbated by the difficulty of jettisoning wartime mentalities and the general power dynamics of military occupation. Indeed, despite the HCITR being a civilian organization, it oversaw the forces stationed in the Rhineland in what was ultimately a military situation. The HCITR could issue decrees or even declare martial law, returning the territory to military control.[20] Thus the French, via Tirard—who reported to the *ministre des Affaires etrangères* (Foreign Minister)—held a considerable amount of power here.[21]

By January 1923, France controlled 75 per cent of occupied territory, incorporating the former American zone when they withdrew. This included Koblenz and the area west of it, as well as the southern part of the left bank, around the bridgehead of Mainz.[22] Some estimates put the number of Rhinelanders living under Allied occupation at twelve million, whereas French troop numbers peaked at 222,000 in June 1919, falling because of military demobilization to around 94–95,000 by February/March 1920.[23] Of these, 20–25,000 were colonial troops.[24] Overall, Beaupré estimates 200–300,000 French troops, civil servants, administrators and their families

14 Le Naour, *Honte*, 7; Jeannesson, 'French', 476; Jacques Bariéty, 'Les Occupations françaises en Allemagne après les deux guerres mondiales', *Relations internationales*, 79 (1994), 324.

15 Schröder and Watson, 'Occupation'.

16 Bariéty, 'Les Occupations', 327.

17 'Supplement: Official Documents—Agreement between the United States of America, Belgium, the British Empire and France, of the One Part, and Germany of the other Part, with Regard to Military Occupation of the Territories of Rhine', *The American Journal of International Law*, 13 (1919), 404–09.

18 Le Naour, *1919–1921*, 120; Jeannesson, 'French', 476; Beaupré, *Histoire*, 171–72; Tirard, *L'Art français*; Godefroy, *Accepter l'occupation*.

19 'Rhineland under Allied rule: regulations adopted by the High Commission cause friction—some of them are modified,' *Current History* (1916–1940), 12 (1920), 19. Also cited in Le Naour, *Honte*, 7.

20 Peter M. R. Stirk, *The Politics of Military Occupation* (Edinburgh, 2009), 99.

21 Peter Jackson, *Beyond the Balance of Power: France and the Politics of National Security in the Era of the First World War* (Cambridge, 2013), 310.

22 Jeannesson, 'French', 475–76; Beaupré, 'Occuper'; Beaupré, *Histoire*, 140; Cabanes, *Victoire*, 192–95.

23 Beaupré, 'Occuper'; Cabanes, *Victoire*, 193; Le Naour, *Honte*, 37.

24 Le Naour, *Honte*, 37; Boonstra, 'Women's Honour', 546, footnote 3.

were in the Rhineland for the duration of the occupation.[25] Therefore, there were many opportunities for occupiers and occupied to come into contact and conflict.

Yet conflict regarding the Rhineland had occurred at higher levels even before the occupation began, in ways that informed the French response to the incidents outlined below. As Peter Jackson has demonstrated, Allied and French policy towards the Rhineland was a central topic of negotiation during peace discussions in 1919. Most French political and military elites pushed for a separate buffer state to protect France from the threat of a resurgent Germany, but opposition from the British and Americans led Président du Conseil (prime minister) Georges Clemenceau to settle for the compromise, temporary occupation in return for miliary guarantees from Britain and the United States.[26] These guarantees soon came to nothing when the US Senate refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles in March 1920, thus the Americans did not join the League of Nations, which caused the British to withdraw their own guarantees for France.[27] At this point, as Conan Fischer remarks, for the French, 'the entire peace settlement and the security it offered were beginning to unravel'.[28] French influence, power and presence in the Rhineland were therefore vital to ensure the Germans fulfilled their obligations under the peace treaty, including reparations payments representing a lifeline for the French nation whose economy, population and landscape had been ravaged by invasion, occupation and war.[29] Across the political spectrum, French politicians argued for enforcement of German reparations payments, even if there was disagreement about the best approach.[30] Securing compliance from Germany—especially when most German politicians and industrialists were opposed to fulfilling the treaty—remained at the heart of understandably strained Franco–German relations in the early 1920s.[31] Beyond yet related to these economic and security concerns, key French political figures such as Clemenceau and Jules Cambon acknowledged, in 1919 and 1921 respectively, that France was in relative decline and becoming a second-order power.[32] In more ways than one, then, by early 1920 the victorious French had cause to feel increasingly vulnerable and insecure both on the global stage and in their relations with Germany. This context is important to consider when examining French sensitivity to symbolic affronts in the occupied Rhineland.

II

Daily contact between occupiers and the occupied population took multiple forms, from Rhinelanders being forced to lodge French personnel or forming intimate relationships with French nationals, to encounters in drinking establishments or with military patrols.[33] Yet beyond this, the HCITR and Allied forces affirmed their place as victors and reminded locals that they were vanquished via a plethora of rituals and displays of national symbols, as studied by certain scholars. Bruno Cabanes emphasizes the key moment of the entry of French troops into German towns via military parades accompanied by the latest military equipment such as tanks, with full fanfare, intended to impress locals. This was usually followed by speeches by military commanders seeking to both reassert Allied victory and reassure Rhinelanders. The

25 Beaupré, 'Occuper'.
26 Jackson, *Beyond*, 276–304, especially 276 and 294–95.
27 *Ibid.*, 333.
28 Fischer, *Ruhr*, 14–15.
29 Hugh Clout, *After the Ruins: Restoring the Countryside of Northern France after the Great War* (Exeter, 1996); Nicolas Beaupré, *Les Grandes Guerres, 1914–1945* (Paris, 2012), 199–271.
30 Jackson, *Beyond*, 319–20.
31 *Ibid.*, 331; Conan Fischer, *A Vision of Europe: Franco–German Relations during the Great Depression, 1929–1932* (Oxford, 2017), 1–25.
32 Jackson, *Beyond*, 309, 317.
33 Horst-Pierre Bothien, *Bonn sur-le-Rhin: die Besatzungszeit 1918–1926* (Munich, 2018), 59–61; Cabanes, *Victoire*, 234–36; Kienitz, 'Tantôt Ami', 264–65.

occupied population reacted with a mixture of silence, fear and curiosity.[34] Here, there was an echo of colonial mindsets, especially those put forward by Marshall Lyautey, with whom Tirard had worked administering the Protectorate of Morocco.[35] Lyautey sought, not always successfully, to demonstrate force through pomp and ceremony rather than having to use it; such an approach was later to inform the occupation of Germany after the Second World War.[36] The overlap between colonial administration and administering the Rhineland will be returned to below, although French actions in the Rhineland ultimately remained distinct from and distinctly less violent than those in the colonial sphere.

Kienitz offers a slightly different take on patriotic pageantry in the Rhineland: for her, the arrival of French troops was part of a 'mise-en-scène' underlining the 'hegemonic ambitions of the occupier', further emphasized by the switch to French time, and the appearance of 'numerous national symbols. The French tricolour invaded the public space. The German national anthem and national festivals were banned.' For Kienitz, this was about 'making the occupied conscious of the loss of their identity so that they would voluntarily renounce their German citizenship'.[37] It is true that Allied and especially French symbols were hard to miss in the Rhineland. In another study, Kienitz refers to the 'Frenchification' of the town of Landau, where the French tricolour was everywhere: from flags and banners to the lighting of the residency of the French commander. Officers' lodgings had their own French flag, and the building for French public services was watched over by a statue of a French soldier and flag. As Neuwöhner remarks, in the French occupation zone national flags became charged symbols that served to fix or break down the temporary asymmetries between occupiers and occupied—hinting at the tensions discussed further below.[38] Beyond flags, Kienitz continues, 'the presence of the French was constantly displayed: extinguishing lights, parades, processions, military concerts. [...] Streets were rebaptized with French names. Similarly, any emblems and symbols marking one's German nationality were forbidden under the threat of fines.'[39] Beaupré highlights the same symbolic forms of domination, as well as the obligation of locals to 'salute' (doff one's hat to) the French flag and step off the pavement to let French troops pass, arguing that these often led to hostility and even physical altercations.[40] For example, in Bonn on 30 February 1922, a French lieutenant of the 19th Dragons used a riding whip to lash a German man who had refused to cede him the pavement; whereas in Landau the following month, young German men aged 16–19 punched a French *cannonier* who refused to let them stay on the pavement, and in response he attacked one assailant with his bayonet.[41] Beaupré and Kienitz suggest that such physical clashes and wider HCITR/French policies ended up reinforcing a specifically German identity amongst Rhinelanders who previously did not entirely adhere to this—in a way, undermining the entire French approach of peaceful penetration.[42]

National symbols and signs of dominance therefore provoked strong reactions amongst both French and Germans, with a shared sensitivity to perceived challenges to identities, and desire to maintain one's status. My own research reinforces such an idea and shows how the

34 Cabanes, *Victoire*, 197, 209–21.

35 For reflections on the colonial mindset, see Martin Thomas (ed.), *The French Colonial Mind* 2 vols, *Vol. 1: Mental Maps of Empire and Colonial Encounters*; *Vol. 2: Violence, Military Encounters, and Colonialism* (Lincoln and London, 2012). The difficulties of defining a single or specifically French colonial mindset are discussed in vol. 1, xi–xxvi.

36 Drew Flanagan, 'La Juste Sévérité: pacifier la zone française en Allemagne occupée, 1945–1949,' in *En Territoire ennemi, 1914–1949: expériences d'occupation, transferts, héritages*, eds James Connolly, Emmanuel Debruyne, Élise Julien and Matthias Merlaen (Lille, 2018), 205–16.

37 Kienitz, 'L'Occupation française'.

38 Neuwöhner, *Britannia*, 255.

39 Kienitz, 'Tantôt Ami', 265, footnote 10.

40 Beaupré, *Les Traumatismes*, 144.

41 A[rchives] N[ationales], AJ/9/5232, Agression de M. Neckmanns, Bonn, Note du Bureau Militaire, 1 May 1922; Affaire du cannonier Quintau, Landau, Armée du Rhin report, 15 March 1922.

42 Beaupré, *Histoire*, 172–76; Kienitz, L'Occupation française'.

French authorities were particularly attuned to and interested in these issues. Indeed, flags held such symbolic value, and notions of victory and defeat were so strong, that the French government invoked the Treaty of Versailles to demand the return of a German collection of French flags from the Franco–Prussian War, stored in three crates in Berlin. The flags, seemingly never handed over, were mysteriously stolen in July 1922, demonstrating how such symbols could be targeted and abused.[43] The HCITR was acutely aware of and worried about this from the beginning, when it informed locals on 11 January 1920 via Ordinance 40 that:

> Any person whose words, gestures or attitude in regard to the members of the High Commission or persons attached to it, or in regard to the occupying troops or any member of these troops, or in regard to the flag or any military emblem of the allied and associated powers, is characterized as insulting or unseemly will incur the punishments provided for the carrying out of the ordinances of the High Commission.[44]

Interestingly, whether consciously or otherwise, the HCITR's policies regarding national symbols, military parades and street names echoed those of the occupying Germans in northern France and Belgium from 1914 to 1918.[45] In some cases, they seemed to go further: initially, the HCITR had ordered that all uniformed Germans should salute Entente colours, but this—alongside the word *inconvenant* ('unseemly')—was dropped on 16 January 1920 in response to a formal German government protest at certain regulations.[46] Of course, the notion of what was 'insulting' remained open to interpretation, but it is clear that the HCITR and especially French authorities did indeed perceive insults to their authority via national symbols, and they sought justice or redress for this. In Biebrich (south of Wiesbaden), at c. 2am on 27 May 1921, the French flag was ripped and stolen from the door of the Foyer du Soldat, a place of rest and recreation for French soldiers and First World War veterans. The symbolic importance of the flag's disappearance, and the perceived breach of HCITR regulations, were evident to French and Germans alike. The mayor immediately presented excuses on behalf of the municipality to the French commander and, at the instigation of the HCITR, the local press reported on the incident ('which could have grave consequences for our town') two days later, offering a reward to anyone with information on the perpetrator.[47] The German policeman responsible for guarding the flag was immediately dismissed and, on 4 June, General Degoutte (commander of the Armée du Rhin) wrote to Tirard about the affair.[48] He stated: 'I feel that this new offence against the French flag and France must be put right in a striking manner', including a public ceremony at which the mayor would apologize again, with the full apology repeated in local newspapers, and sanctions against the chief of police if the guilty party were not found.[49] The ceremony took place on 6 June 1921 with full fanfare: French military music and a parade, soldiers marching by and saluting the flag, French families present, the municipal police wearing dress uniforms, and the desired public apology from the mayor.[50] The ceremony rectified the affront to France

43 'Les Drapeaux français de 1870 escamotés à Berlin', *Le Petit Journal*, 29 July 1922, 5.

44 'Rhineland under Allied rule', 20.

45 Nivet, *France occupée*, 55–84; James E. Connolly, *The Experience of Occupation in the Nord: Living with the Enemy in First World War France* (Manchester, 2018), 232–37. Unfortunately, there is no space here to discuss links between these occupations further.

46 'Rhineland under Allied Rule', 21.

47 AN, AJ/9/5228, Affaire du drapeau de Biebrich, Le Délégué de la H.C.I.T.R. dans le District de Wiesbaden à M. le Haut Commissaire de la République Française dans les Provinces du Rhin, 29 May 1921.

48 AN, AJ/9/5228, Note pour la Haute Commission, Relève de l'incident relatif à l'enlèvement du drapeau français au Foyer du Soldat de BIEBRICH, 1921; General Degoutte to Paul Tirard, 4 June 1921.

49 AN, AJ/9/5228, Degoutte to Tirard, 4 June 1921.

50 AN, AJ/9/5228, 'Une Réparation: la ville de Biebrich s'excuse au sujet du drapeau volé', unknown newspaper, 10 September 1921.

and its authority, reminding the population of French dominance, and was even reported in the French national press.[51]

As this suggests, it was not only those present in the Rhineland who felt that symbols of French honour had to be respected: in October 1921, French national newspapers reported that in Trier a *chasseur* had been punished with eight days' imprisonment for knocking the hat off a German man who refused to 'salute' the French flag carried by passing troops.[52] *Le Petit Bleu* agreed that the soldier deserved punishment but criticized the military, because 'it should not be possible that there exist, in the French military zone, Boches capable of not saluting the French flag when passing it. If this fact occurred, it is because the general did not know how to make our flag feared or respected.'[53] A further incident of alleged disrespect towards the French flag took place in Wiesbaden. Here, a French veterans' association wrote a letter in August 1922 to the *délégué supérieur*, the highest-ranking HCITR administrator for the area.[54] They complained that in the Café Atlantic, every night between 9pm and 11pm, a uniformed American soldier sat drinking on a reserved tabled alongside Germans. The table had a collection of small flags: American, 'English', Swiss and German. The author scoffed: 'Only the French flag is absent! For what motive? Is it not necessary to remind this American soldier that he is in the French occupation zone! [sic].'[55] Five days later, the *délégué* 'officially invited the café owner to make these flags disappear'.[56] It is unclear if this happened, but the lack of further documentation suggests it did.

Elsewhere, though, certain French officers felt attempts to resolve incidents involving French flags did not go far enough. In Bad Kreuznach, the French flag was stolen on the night of 27/28 February 1921 from the garden of the house of Colonel Philippe, the *délégué du district*.[57] Perhaps because the theft was to the detriment of a French officer and a high-ranking HCITR official, Tirard considered the incident so important and insulting to France that he kept the *ministre des Affaires etrangères* informed via telegram.[58] The military officers reporting on the case called for more severe punishment than just a 'reparation ceremony'. In a letter to Tirard on 2 March 1921, Degoutte listed the flag theft as one of a 'series of grave offences made against France in occupied territory, in the person of French officers or of her flag', listing these: 'Twice, General Demetz, Commander of the 37th Division d'infanterie (DI) has been knocked over by Germans; a French lieutenant was knocked over in Niederlahnstein; a French commander was shot at by a German in Zorsheim; the French flag was slashed in Oberlahnstein—it was stolen in Kreuznach.' Thus, for Degoutte, attacking the flag was equivalent to shooting or knocking over a French officer; opposition targeting national symbols was the same as physical violence, both undermining French authority. Degoutte went on to complain about the 'bad faith' (*mauvaise volonté*) of the German government in seeking and punishing the perpetrators of these incidents, calling for 'energetic sanctions', including of German authorities who would not co-operate. Degoutte concluded: 'Our dignity and security are at stake.'[59] Much of Degoutte's letter echoed the words of General d'Anselme, commander of the 38th DI, who wrote the initial report on the incident a few days earlier. D'Anselme was outraged at these recent insults to France,

51 'Le Drapeau enlevé à Biebrich est remis en place', *Le Petit Parisien* 8 June 1921, 3.

52 AN, AJ/9/5232, Trêves, affaire du chasseur Marie RAYMOND, extracts from *Le Matin*, 30 October 1921 and *Le Petit Bleu*, 3 November 1921.

53 AN, AJ/9/5232, extract from *Le Petit Bleu*, 3 November 1921.

54 The Rhineland Agreement established administrative areas known as Districts and Circles, headed by Delegates and Superior Delegates, acting as liaisons between the HCITR and German administrations. Bothien, *Bonn*, 133.

55 AN, AJ/9/5228, Café Atlantic, Members of the Association des anciens combattants to délégué of Wiesbaden, 23 August 1922.

56 AN, AJ/9/5228, Délégué Supérieur of Wiesbaden to Tirard, 28 August 1922.

57 AN, AJ/9/5228, Enlèvement du drapeau de la Délégation Supérieure de Kreuznach, translated article from *Öffentlicher Anzeiger*, 11 March 1921; Armée du Rhin, État–Major, 2e Bureau C. E., Sûreté Générale, Secteur de Kreuznach, Compte–Rendu, 3 March 1921.

58 AN, AJ/9/5228, telegrams, Tirard to minister of Foreign Affairs, 4 and 15 March 1921.

59 AN, AJ/9/5228, Degoutte to Tirard, 2 March 1921.

seemed unconvinced by the mayor of Bad Kreuznach's apology ('The mayor came to apologize, that's what the mayors always do in such cases'), and thought local German authorities were withholding information on the flag thief (the Germans 'know or could *certainly know* [sic] who is the perpetrator'). He also argued for stronger sanctions, concluding: 'It is necessary to do so. If, during the occupation similar incidents had occurred in France in 1872 or 1873, the Germans would not have hesitated.'[60] It is interesting that d'Anselme invoked this occupation rather than that of 1914–18, presumably wishing to compare peacetime occupations and reinforce the sense of total victory over Germany. In any case, the Bad Kreuznach affair ended the same way as that of Bierbich, with a reparation ceremony including a statement from the mayor 'severely disapproving' of the actions of the unknown individual who stole the 'emblem of French sovereignty'.[61]

One difference, though, was that the Bad Kreuznach affair allowed French intelligence investigators to draw a clearer link between different forms of anti-French actions. The investigation concluded the flag was probably taken by young men and women, members of a sports society (*Turnverein*), because they had already engaged in other provocative activities: a month before, between midnight and 1am, they frequently passed below the window of Colonel Philippe 'singing marching songs and marching'. Philippe had informed the mayor, who posted an article in the press explaining how these youths could be sanctioned for 'night-time disturbance' and faced severe measures. The singing stopped, but the marching did not, and the men simply switched to coughing and sneezing loudly. The report's author believed that these young people acted as a result of propaganda, suggesting an organized anti-French attitude.[62] Tirard echoed this logic in a note to all HCITR delegates published in April 1922, in which he stated that recent incidents had occurred between Allied troops and locals at the end of meetings of German 'societies', where:

> anti-Allied language and pan-Germanist discourses were pronounced. It seems likely that such facts would not have occurred if the members of the societies in question had not been over-excited by anti-Allied, especially anti-French, propaganda, which is becoming more intense and which finds increasingly fertile ground among certain societies.[63]

The French sense of an organized, orchestrated, campaign against them in the Rhineland therefore went beyond fears of the 'Black Shame' campaign to include symbolic attacks on French authority. 'Pan-Germanist' discourses directly undermined Tirard's 'peaceful penetration', reinforcing German identity at the expense of the idealized separate Rhenish identity—the hope being that self-identifying Rhinelanders would work with French authorities to undermine alleged Prussian dominance, believing that closer ties between France and the Rhineland were beneficial. There was little sense, on the French side, of the possibility that French actions on the ground—the raft of 'indignities and difficulties', as one German observer put it, including ostentatious displays of French patriotism or banning such displays amongst locals—could provoke genuine animosity amongst Rhinelanders.[64]

Groups of young people engaged in further demonstrations of anti-French sentiment in which flags were targeted. In Trier, in late 1921 or early 1922 (the archival documents are unclear), 'German partygoers, coming from public balls' sang loudly on weekends, waking

60 AN, AJ/9/5228, Général d'Anselme, commandant la 38e Division d'infanterie, to monsieur le général commandant le 30e Corps d'armée, 28 February 1921.

61 AN, AJ/9/5228, Tirard to minister of Foreign Affairs, 15 March 1921.

62 AN, AJ/9/5228, Compte-rendu, 3 March 1921.

63 AN, AJ/9/5236, Agression de 2 gendarmes français de Landau par au moins 10 jeunes gens allemands, Haut–Commissariat de la République Française dans les Provinces du Rhin, Bureau Militaire, note, 24 April 1922.

64 Wilhelm Marx, 'The Rhineland Occupation', *Foreign Affairs*, 7/2 (January 1929), 199.

up soldiers in barracks; outside the home of the local French general, they also purposefully engaged in 'provocative singing', raised clenched fists at the French flag and shouted phrases like 'in five years we will have kicked out all of the French'.[65] Symbolic affronts to French and HCITR power occurred beyond directly targeting flags, such as on 29 January 1922 in Zell, when drunken men spilt out of an event for German war-wounded. They harassed Lieutenant-Colonel Meyer, the *délégué* for Zell, by shouting at his window, constantly ringing his doorbell and waking and scaring his wife and child. The next morning, the *délégué* convoked the Landrat (municipal council) and the mayor, explaining that it was a double attack on the 'dignity' of the HCITR and the French Army. They presented their excuses, and Meyer considered the matter closed, but wondered if the events were related to the fact that he had refused a request in December from the war-wounded society to sing the banned *O Heimat Sonne*.[66] Of course, actions couched in evident anti-French symbolism were not the sole preserve of drunken individuals: in April 1922 in Jürich, three male high-school pupils moved a canon in front of the headquarters of the HCITR delegation and also ripped the tricolour placard. They were punished by local police, at the instigation of the HCITR, and each sentenced to a 5,000-Mark fine, plus eight days' imprisonment for two boys and fifteen days' imprisonment for the other.[67] The apparent predominance of young men involved in these incidents and those studied below is intriguing; even if the masculine nouns used in the French may also encompass women, the sense is mainly of young men—perhaps not having fought in the war—expressing frustration at the foreign military in a performative manner.

Songs were central to further cases of perceived anti-French behaviour. In Traben-Trarbach, four workers were condemned in November 1922 to thirty days' imprisonment for having sung *Deutschland über Alles*/the *Deutschlandlied* in the presence of a French gendarme. The HCITR banned this and other German songs in June 1920, and although the ban was soon lifted, it remained a punishable offence to sing the song in a 'provocative' manner.[68] In this instance, the *Reichskommissar* (commissioner of the empire, a political role appointed by Berlin) for the occupied territories protested, but the HCITR responded that it was his duty to remind the population that the national hymn could be viewed as a provocation.[69] Such tensions continued beyond 1923, culminating in diplomatic discussions in Paris and Berlin in 1926 regarding orchestral performances of the *Deutschlandlied* (the national anthem since August 1922) in the Rhineland.[70] Yet the French and Germans were not the only groups implicated in the antagonistic mobilization of national symbols: in Bonn, in summer 1922, the German press reported that American soldiers in a café had sung banned German songs in April that year, including the *Deutschlandlied* and *Wacht am Rhein*; in Koblenz, in August, French and American soldiers were sat in a café when an American captain forced the orchestra—who initially refused—to play *Beautiful German Rhine (O du wunderschöner, deutscher Rhein)*, which he then sang before chastizing the orchestra for not singing along. The German press saw these incidents as an explicit attack on France (one article was entitled 'We are mocking the French').[71] Tirard launched an investigation in August 1922, and informed Président du Conseil Poincaré of the conclusions: American soldiers had 'loudly displayed anti-French sentiments', a summary he offered even

65 AN, AJ/9/5234, Affaire Caserne des Chasseurs, Trêves, Extrait du c[ompte]-r[endu]. No. 22 de A[rmée].F[rançaise]. [du]R[hin]., n.d. The surrounding documents suggest this took place in late 1921 or early 1922.

66 AN, AJ/9/5232, Affaire Meyer, Rapport du Lt-Colonel Meyer, délégué de la H. C. dans le Cercle de ZELL, 30 January 1922.

67 AN, AJ/9/5236, Incidents de Jürich, délégué of Jürich to délégué supérieur of Bonn, 4 April 1922.

68 Neuwöhner, *Britannia*, 257.

69 AN, AJ/9/5228, Incidents divers, zone française, inspecteur de police spéciale Schaeffer to commissaire spécial, chef de secteur, Trier, 24 November 1922; note KV.Z–14, n.d.

70 Karin Trieloff, 'Die Nationalhymne als Protest? Das Deustchlandlied im besetzen Rheinland nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg', *Lied und populäre Kultur/Song and Popular Culture*, 60/61 (2015/2016), 313–32.

71 AN, AJ/9/5228, Incidents où des soldats américains ont été mêlés, Tirard to Raymond Poincaré, 31 August 1922.

though one investigation suggested the Bonn incident was actually an attempt by the American men to flaunt their knowledge of German.[72] Commander Henry T. Allen of the American forces in the Rhineland promised Tirard that he would launch his own investigation and expel any American military personnel who were involved.[73] Once more, displays of German patriotism—even carried out by Americans—were seen as insults to France, so important that key figures like Poincaré and Allen had to be informed.

Other slights towards France involved evocations of the defeated kaiser and his empire. In June 1922, a 17- or 18-year-old high-school student was crossing through the Porta Nigra in Trier wearing a small black/white/red flag in his buttonhole. He was arrested and imprisoned for one night for 'provocation and insult to the army of occupation'.[74] In Bensberg, locals twice displayed banned flags in one month, also in 1922.[75] On 2 May, the day of the 'benediction of flags', multiple inhabitants displayed flags bearing the colours of the old German Empire on their houses. The local French commander ordered the soldiers, *Tirailleurs*, to remove the flags, but inhabitants took them down before the troops arrived at their doors. Yet the *Tirailleurs* had approached one house before receiving the order; as they did so, the windows of nearby houses opened and women appeared, laughing and thumbing their noses. The French report stated it was possible that the exasperated soldiers responded by throwing stones at the windows.[76] On 24 May, a festival day, locals again displayed the colours of the *Kaiserreich*, and the commander once more ordered troops to take them down. This occurred, according to the French, without violence, refuting the claims of the German *Reichskommissar*, according to whom the soldiers had ripped up the flags or thrown them in the street, whilst waving revolvers.[77]

Symbolic and physical violence was linked in other cases, too. On 11 June 1921 in Biewer, near Trier, at about 10pm, a 'party organized by Germans' took place, involving an illuminated procession during which participants held 'paper lanterns in the colours of the Reich carrying an effigy of [Kaiser] Wilhelm and a W'. Not only were the Germans displaying illegal patriotic colours, but they were also making an explicit reference to the kaiser and therefore the war. In response, a passing French corporal grabbed the 'provocative lantern', leading to 'minor pushing and shoving between civilians and soldiers' that ended with a German man driving a car at speed towards the crowd. It stopped in front of the French soldiers, and the driver jumped out, brandishing a beer bottle as a weapon; the French corporal responded with a particularly violent blow with his baton. The man, lemonade merchant Rudolf Langerhaus, died of his injuries. The incident was considered serious enough to warrant an investigation and informing the *ministre de la Guerre* (minister of War).[78] A conseil de guerre found the soldier, Corporal Lereculeur, to have acted in legitimate defence, but the unhappy *Reichskommissar* offered a different interpretation of events according to which the car's occupants were assaulted by French soldiers for no reason; the *Reichskommissar* made no mention of the crowd or symbols.[79] For German and French authorities alike, the presence, use and abuse of national symbols in Biewer was therefore a key topic of debate in May 1922.

72 AN, AJ/9/5228, Délégué of les Cercles de Bonn to délégué supérieur of District of Bonn, 18 August 1922.
73 AN, AJ/9/5228, Henry T. Allen to Tirard, 29 August 1922.
74 AN, AJ/9/5234, Armée française du Rhin, état-major, 2^{e} bureau C. E., 29 June 1922, traduction d'un document allemand du 2 juin 1922.
75 Whilst there was a general ban, local HCITR delegates technically had the right to permit the display of flags upon receiving a request in writing forty-eight hours in advance: Neuwöhner, *Britannia*, 255.
76 AN, AJ/9/5233, Incidents de Bensberg, n.d. but the document's position within the *carton* implies the year was 1922.
77 AN, AJ/9/5233, Incidents de Bensberg, translation of first German memorandum, No. 86.
78 AN, AJ/9/5233, Le commissaire–rapporteur près le 3^{e} conseil de guerre de l'armée française du Rhin, à monsieur le ministre de la guerre (10^{e} direction—3^{e} bureau), 5 July 1921.
79 AN, AJ/9/5233, Délégué of Trier to Regierungs President, 7 September 1921; Reichskommissar to Tirard, 9 October 1921.

Scholarship on the other occupation zones suggests that conflicts around national symbols did not occur to the same extent as in the French zone. Neuwöhner refers to just one case of Belgian tricolour flags being stolen in May 1924 that met with a similarly stringent response from the Belgian authorities; an interesting parallel, but it is hard to say if this is a one-off since the Belgian zone is considerably under-studied.[80] I have found no reference to similar concerns or incidents in the literature on the American zone of occupation.[81] The British, on the other hand, did not share French concerns: they not only frequently permitted German flags to fly in their sector, but generally allowed locals to sing banned/nationalistic songs—and even if the British press did sometimes complain about such ostentatious displays, there were no prosecutions for this.[82]

III

By the beginning of the passive resistance campaign in 1923, then, certain incidents had occurred in which Rhinelanders had targeted French symbols or mobilized German symbols in public, interpreted by French authorities as serious incidents worthy of investigation, punishment and sometimes communication with the French government. However, in at least one case, perhaps because of the more widespread and evident acts of passive resistance in January 1923, what could have been understood as another attack on the dignity of France was framed in a more lenient light: on the night of 11/12 January 1923, a French flag was lowered in Bad Ems. It had been flying above a pavilion on the top of a popular spot, the Bäderlei, overlooking the town and especially the war memorial. This flag had already been mysteriously lowered at night a year before, and the pavilion itself burnt to the ground in 1919, presumably (the French report stated) as a way of trying to remove the flag for good.[83] The local *délégué supérieur* wrote to Tirard regarding the most recent incident, emphasizing that as the flag had not been ripped or stolen, it was probably more 'a bad-taste joke' than an 'insult'. The mayor immediately raised the flag, apologized to the *commandant d'armes*, and published a note in the local newspaper offering a reward of 100,000 Marks for information on the responsible person and forbidding anyone to go within 20 metres of the flag.[84] The local French commander suspected the flag had been lowered by someone bribed by a Francophobe German or 'one of the numerous pan-Germanists employed by the Export Office [*Ausfuhramt*] of Bad Ems'.[85] In any case, the *délégué* noted that this incident 'could have been much more serious, showing once more how disadvantageous it is that emblems considered as official are raised within reach of all hands'. It is unclear what 'more serious' meant in this context, presumably the flag being stolen or damaged. The commander recommended the removal of this flag, but only once it could be done in a manner that did not look like a response to the incident; the flag should be kept flying for a certain time, 'in the interests of our prestige'.[86] The notion of 'prestige', alongside the aforementioned 'dignity',

80 Neuwöhner, *Britannia*, 256; Charlotte Vekemans, 'Die Belgische Besatzung des Rheinlands. Politische Entscheidungsfindung und ihr Eingluss auf die alltäglichen Interaktionen von Besatzern und Besetzten, 1918–1923,' in *Die Besatzung des Rheinlandes 1918 bis 1930: allierte Herrschaft und Alltagsbeziehungen nach dem Erstern Weltkrieg*, eds Benedikt Neuwöhner, Georg Mölich and Maike Schmidt (Bielefeld, 2020), 75.

81 Maj. Gen. Johnson Hagood, *Caissons Go Rolling Along: A Memoir of America in Post-World War I Germany*, ed. Larry A. Grant (Columbia, 2012); Dean A. Nowowiejski, *The American Army in Germany, 1918–1923: Success against the Odds* (Lawrence, Kansas, 2021); Keith L. Nelson, *Victors Divided: America and the Allies in Germany, 1918–1923* (Berkeley, 1975).

82 Neuwöhner, *Britannia*, 256–58.

83 AN, AJ/9/5228, Incidents, zone française, délégué of Unterlahn to délégué supérieur of Wiesbaden, 13 January 1923.

84 AN, AJ/9/5228, Délégué supérieur of Wiesbaden to Tirard, 15 January 1923; translated extract of the *Coblenzer Zeitung*, 16 January 1923.

85 AN, AJ/9/5228, Délégué of Unterlahn to délégué supérieur of Wiesbaden.

86 AN, AJ/9/5228, Délégué supérieur of Wiesbaden to Tirard.

is particularly useful for understanding the French reaction to symbolic acts of violence, and actions in the Rhineland more generally.

'Prestige' had been explicitly mentioned in Ordinance 40, in the section on the HCITR's right to ban newspapers and media that were 'calculated to endanger the maintenance of the public order or to militate against the safety or the prestige of the High Commission or of the occupying troops'.[87] It was a concept commonly found in the early 1920s' French press to describe the power and global standing of various countries, but was especially linked to France and its relationship with other nations. Examples where it was used to talk about Franco–German relations and the occupied Rhineland include articles in the right-wing *L'Action française* discussing the need to re-establish 'our prestige' regarding French policy towards Germany so that friends and enemies would respect France, citing a soldier entering the Rhineland aiming to show the Germans the beauty of France and French families and arguing that Rhinelanders could be won over by 'good French people […] spreading their prestige'.[88] Elsewhere, key politicians invoked the concept in speeches or debates and statements in the Senate or National Assembly.[89] Three instances suffice to demonstrate the nature and use of the term in the context of Germany. The *ministre de la Justice* (minister of Justice) passed on a message of newly elected President Millerand to the Senate in September 1920, stating the newly formed government was pursuing foreign-policy aims including the enforcement of the peace treaties and 'maintaining our prestige at the high level to which victory has brought it'.[90] Millerand further remarked, in March 1921, on an attack on Allied controllers overseeing reparations in Germany by stating: 'It must be the case that our prestige as victors has fallen especially low in German eyes for such aggressions to have taken place.'[91] Former President Poincaré, speaking to high-school students in July 1920, expanded upon these ideas, arguing that 'France has found today her prestige and rank in the world' because of both victory on the battlefield and maintaining her 'intellectual and moral heritage of which the safeguarding concerned the future of humanity'.[92] In this sense, it was also related to the notion of French 'cultural power' visible via cultural institutions or education in nations outside the context of occupation, as examined by Charlotte Faucher and Marie-Paul Ha.[93] Prestige was therefore about France's position on the global stage, notably the status of being a victor and powerful nation worthy of respect, despite the economic and security challenges France faced.

Furthermore, prestige was inextricably linked to the civilizing mission, since it was a key motivating force behind colonialism and a factor in colonizer–colonized relations.[94] Edward Said, referring to Henri Brunschwig's work, stated that 'not all empires were the same. France's empire […] was energized by "prestige"'.[95] This is clear, as the phrase was used by a variety of newspapers and academic journals across the entire period of the Third Republic to discuss differing colonial contexts or situations—so much so that a short-lived journal devoted

87 'Rhineland under Allied rule', 20.

88 'Rien n'est encore perdu!', *L'Action française: organe du nationalisme intégral*, 2 December 1922, 4; 'Une lettre du Rhin', 17 September 1921, 1.

89 It was used c. thirty times a year in the *Journal officiel* in the period 1920 to 1923, in contexts from financial affairs or the application of the peace treaty, to teaching or colonial policy: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb34363182v/date.item>.

90 *Journal officiel de la république française: débats parlementaires. Sénat: compte-rendu in-extenso*, séance du 25 septembre 1920, communication du gouvernement, 26 September 1920, 1,735.

91 *Le Temps*, 'Le discours de M. Millerand', 28 March 1920.

92 *Le Temps*, 'Un discours de M. Poincaré', 13 July 1920.

93 Charlotte Faucher, *Propaganda, Gender, and Cultural Power: Projections and Perceptions of France in Britain c. 1880–1944* (Oxford, 2022); Marie-Paule Ha, 'From nos ancêtres les Gaulois to leur culture ancestrale: symbolic violence and the politics of colonial schooling in Indochina', *French Colonial History*, 3 (2003), 101–18.

94 Catherine Gegout, *Why Europe Intervenes in Africa* (Oxford, 2018), 66.

95 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1994), 348, footnote 173 referencing Henri Brunschwig, *French Colonialism 1871–1914: Myths and Realities* (London, 1966), 14.

to the empire published in 1938 was entitled *Notre Prestige*.[96] John Boonstra has underlined how prestige played a role even in pseudo-colonial situations like fin-de-siècle Beirut—in this case, a sense of masculine, imperial prestige particularly concerned with gender and permissible conduct.[97] Further, Emmanuelle Saada has demonstrated that under the Third Republic, prestige was linked to the notion of 'dignity' within the colonial sphere—yet another phrase also used by French administrators in the Rhineland. In particular, Saada argues, 'the preoccupation with dignity and prestige surfaced especially in the context of intimate contact between colonizers and *indigènes*'.[98] In the Rhineland, when it came to alleged violence carried out by the French and especially French colonial soldiers, a reversal of Saada's argument is visible: a preoccupation with prestige in the context of intimate contact or violence between colonial soldiers and Rhinelanders. Much of the French response to accusations of the 'Black Shame' campaign accusing colonial soldiers of violence was about refuting these claims, or punishing French troops genuinely involved in violence, to avoid damaging France's reputation.[99] This attitude informed reactions to even minor rumours about this topic. For instance, when colonial troops spent time in Kaiserslautern from 13 to 25 April 1921, stories circulated amongst locals that these men had engaged in acts of physical and sexual violence against Rhenish prostitutes in a certain brothel—rumours the owner of the establishment admitted to French investigators were false.[100] On 25 April itself, a French *commissaire spécial* reported that the 'tendentious' stories were entirely invented by 'determined pan-Germanists or propagandists in the pay of the German government'. He concluded that:

> For the prestige of France, the maintenance of the good reputation of these troops whose behaviour and correct attitude, during their brief stay here, have been beyond reproach from all angles, it is necessary to prompt the Municipality, who must be held partly responsible, to offer a denial in the press of this shameful campaign that is particularly harmful to our prestige.[101]

Degoutte summarized this in a letter to Tirard, arguing that the campaign aimed to 'harm the armies of occupation', suggesting an internalized equivalence between French troops and France as a nation, mirroring that between French symbols and French power.[102] For once, Tirard himself was less concerned here, responding that 'ridiculous rumours' occurred every week, and that inserting a denial in the local press would just draw attention to an insignificant and, thus far, ignored story.[103]

Still, prestige was clearly an important factor for all involved, and was therefore not just about international standing but also how the French acted in the Rhineland and the ways in which locals understood, portrayed and reacted to the French presence. Elsewhere, Tirard echoed similar notions, concluding the preface to his occupation memoirs by thanking civilian and military HCITR collaborators whose efforts over twelve years of occupation had assured the 'dignity'

96 'Le Massif montagneux des Beni Snassen et ses abords (Maroc oriental)', *Revue de géographie*, 5 (1911), 2; 'La France au Tombouctou', *Le Gaulois: littéraire et politique*, 26 January 1894, 2; *Le Monde colonial illustré*, 1 January 1931, 1; 'Une Nouvelle Route vient d'être inaugurée dans l'extrême-sud', *Le Petit Marocain*, 11 March 1935, 2; *Notre Prestige: revue mensuelle publiée par la société d'études et de diffusion 'La Spirale'*, 15 February, 1 July, 1 August and 1 September 1938.

97 John Boonstra, 'Scandal in fin-de-siècle Beirut: gender, morality, and imperial prestige between France and Lebanon', *Journal of World History*, 28 (2017), 371–93.

98 Emmanuelle Saada, 'The empire of law: dignity, prestige, and domination in the "colonial situation"', *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 20 (2002), 99.

99 Le Naour, *Honte*, 169–215.

100 AN, AJ/9/5236, Troupes noires, Degoutte to Tirard, 9 May 1921.

101 AN, AJ/9/5236, Commissaire Spécial Adjoint Gruet to monsieur le commissaire spécial, chef du service de sûreté de l'armée, and monsieur le délégué de la H.C.I. dans le Cercle de Kaiserslautern, 25 April 1921.

102 AN, AJ/9/5236, Degoutte to Tirard, 9 May 1921.

103 AN, AJ/9/5236, Tirard to Degoutte, 27 May 1921.

and 'greatness' [*grandeur*] of France.[104] He also claimed that French troops in the Rhineland 'refrained from reprisals unworthy of our flags', once again invoking the sacred symbol of the *patrie*.[105] Tirard had held such views since the beginning of his time in the Rhineland: in April 1920, journalist Marcel Rey of *Le Petit Journal* interviewed him in the HCITR headquarters. Tirard reinforced the symbolism seen on the ground, remarking that 'wherever Allied flags fly' in the Rhineland, public order would not be troubled by military coups or 'revolutionary convulsions'. Yet he also spoke of the 'prestige' of France, in this case linking it to respect for democracy, protection of work and a liberal occupation administration. The journalist also noted that when a *chef de service* entered to talk to Tirard, the latter responded by saying, 'We are a bit like in Africa, here', going on to say that civilian and military personnel had to work together quickly and efficiently—but the remark is perhaps telling.[106] Indeed, like Tirard, General Degoutte also had a significant past in the French colonies and relationship with the empire: he had served in Madagascar and Tunisia from 1895 to 1899, Algeria from 1905 to 1911, played a key commanding role in the Morocco expedition in 1911/12, and commanded Moroccan troops in key battles of 1916.[107] It is likely, therefore, that such an experience likewise informed his understanding of France's 'prestige' in the Rhineland.

Tirard and Degoutte had also both pushed for a separate Rhenish buffer state during peace negotiations, and afterwards Tirard continued to encourage Rhenish separatism and economic links with France out of a belief in 'the desire of the Rhinelanders to free themselves from the clutches of Prussia'.[108] The approach avoided direct interference, unlike General Mangin's role in the failed separatist putsch in Mainz and Wiesbaden in May/June 1919.[109] Instead, Tirard's 'civilizing mission' involved the promotion of 'democracy' and French culture through means such as art exhibitions and language classes. The aim was to reinforce the notion that Rhinelanders had more in common with—and would benefit from closer connections to—France than the rest of Germany. The French reinforced historic links, such as the Napoleonic Confederation of the Rhine; however, as Beaupré notes, some locals found this approach arrogant, with the French imparting 'true' culture as if to a colonized people.[110] The desire for closer links between France and the Rhineland, and by proxy weaker ties between the Rhineland and unoccupied Germany, offers another reason why displays of wider German patriotism were perceived by French administrators as particularly frustrating and provocative. Yet the flip side, (en)forcing respect for French symbols, seems counter-productive; here, maintaining prestige trumped other considerations.

Overall, whilst French occupation officials used the word 'prestige' explicitly only rarely in the documents consulted for this article, a logic of national prestige and dignity—aimed at both the local population and the wider world—was implicit in their actions and thoughts. Even outside observers noted this, such as left-wing newspaper *L'Humanité*, which argued that 'annexationist' French generals in the Rhineland were driven by a desire to satisfy 'prestige, nothing else'—at least that was its take on the brief occupation of Frankfurt and Darmstadt in April 1920, the French response to German troops being sent into the demilitarized Ruhr to crush a potential workers' revolution.[111] It is also clear that passive resistance to the Ruhr occupation

104 Paul Tirard, *La France sur le Rhin: douze années d'occupation rhénane* (Paris, 1930), v.
105 *Ibid.*, 257–58.
106 'Notre prestige en Rhénanie s'est accru avec la crise allemande: un entretien avec M. Tirard, haut commissaire', *Le Petit Journal*, 2 April 1920, 1.
107 <https://www.cheminsdememoire.gouv.fr/en/jean-degoutte>
108 Jackson, *Beyond*, 340–41.
109 Le Naour, *1919–21*, 126–31.
110 *Ibid.*, 172.
111 'Les Deux Militarismes: l'invasion de la Westphalie et l'occupation de Frankfort', *L'Humanité*, 5 April 1920, 3; Le Naour, *Honte*, 58.

represented a severe threat to such notions, something felt keenly by the French. National symbols and notions of prestige therefore came back to the fore during the initial weeks and months of the Ruhr crisis.

IV

French and Belgian troops entered the Ruhr on 11 January 1923.[112] Local and national German authorities, in discussion with trade unions and various industries, had been planning for work stoppages, strikes, demonstrations and other forms of opposition in the event of the occupation of the Ruhr; this was the bedrock of the 'passive resistance' campaign.[113] It marked the beginning of a different period of heightened Franco–German tensions on the ground, one that was partially less spontaneous but also more violent and no less fascinating.[114] Unfortunately, the impact of the Ruhr occupation on the wider Rhineland experience cannot be examined in detail here, but a few reflections suffice to demonstrate the way in which symbolism and prestige continued to be key considerations of the French in this period.

French authorities were aware of the planned German tactics and were particularly concerned about the first wave of such actions organized to take place in the Rhineland and Ruhr in mid-January, notably the *Trauertag* (day of mourning) called for Sunday 14 January by the Reich and Bavarian governments. One of the planned actions in the Ruhr itself was to put flags at half-mast, which the French forbade in areas in which their troops were stationed.[115] However, for both the Rhineland and the Ruhr, French authorities were unsure how to respond. General Demetz issued a top-secret 'service note' about this to *délégués* and French military commanders just days before, reminding them that German civil servants would be punished for not following HCITR orders, and that public demonstrations likely to trouble the public order would be banned. He informed recipients to carry out his instructions 'with *firmness* but with *tact and good judgement* [sic]' to avoid exacerbating the situation.[116] Many acts of opposition occurred from mid-January until April at least, notably demonstrations in the streets involving hundreds, sometimes thousands of civilians; two-minute silences; tracts and posters calling for further demonstrations; insults of Allied personnel and even vandalism and physical altercations. Certain actions were co-ordinated, often occurring on the same day: for example, on 24 January, demonstrations occurred in at least sixteen different towns under French control.[117] A common feature of such incidents was Rhinelanders singing patriotic songs. In Mainz, on 24 January 1923, demonstrators carried out acts of violence and vandalism throughout the city (including 'molesting' French soldiers), but there was also an incident involving a public court case deliberating the punishment of a local industrialist engaging in passive resistance.[118] During the proceedings, a crowd entered the courtroom and sang German patriotic and anti-French songs. At 6.40pm, when the court shared its decision to punish the industrialist, a crowd of c. 5–6,000 gathered, becoming increasingly violent. They booed French officers, threw stones and snowballs, eventually spilling throughout the town, continuing their 'hostile cries', and threatening to hit French soldiers they encountered. The crowd was mostly made up of 'unemployed youths, women and especially the young of sporting Societies [sic]; some outsiders from the region

112 Fischer, *Ruhr*, 41–42.
113 *Ibid.*, 29–48.
114 Mark Jones, *1923: The Forgotten Crisis in the Year of Hitler's Coup* (London, 2023), Chapters 6 and 7. My thanks to the author for sending me a pre-publication extract.
115 AN, AJ/9/5229/A, Ruhr 1923, Message téléphonique par le 2e bureau de l'armée française du Rhin, 13 January 1923.
116 AN, AJ/9/5229/A, General Demetz, note de service, 12 January 1923.
117 See various documents in AN, AJ/9/5229/A. The towns are Wiesbaden, Kreuznach, Kaiserslautern, Landau, Spire, Neustadt, Pirmasens, Traben-Trarbach, Zell, Bonn, Worms, Koblenz, Trier, Ludwigshafen, Bingerbrück, and Düren.
118 AN, AJ/9/5229/A, Ruhr 1923, Lieutenant-Colonel Spiral, délégué supérieur dans la province, to Mr Herardt, mayor of Mainz, 9 February 1923.

of Essen'. They eventually went towards the areas where French families lived. French *spahis* (Algerian cavalry troopers) were sent to protect key points in the city, and the crowd eventually dispersed at 11pm. The author of the French report on the incident, written in February, concluded: 'My feeling is that the late intervention of our troops has perceptibly diminished our prestige *vis-à-vis* the Germans.'[119] Tirard had come to the same conclusion the day after the incident, telegramming all *délégués supérieurs* and stating he had just been informed that 'more or less violent and scandalous demonstrations took place in diverse towns in the Occupied Territories, notably in Mainz and Bonn. Such facts cannot be tolerated without a grave attack on the principle of our authority.' He called for more rigorous measures to be taken in future.[120]

Similar logic is visible in a 'personal reflection' on the Mainz incident written by an unknown author, seemingly a French officer/HCITR administrator. Alongside criticism of the German police, he blamed the French military authorities who were guilty of '*total inertia* and of *a singular clumsiness*' [*maladresse*]. The author three times mentioned that the crowds sang patriotic and anti-French songs, including *Wacht am Rhein* and *Deutschland über Alles*, plus other songs with explicit, violent anti-French lyrics. The tone of the reflection is disbelief and outrage, including comments that the French gave locals a spectacle of inertia that they interpreted as impotence. He continued:

> We have given them the occasion to gather as a group and with the spirit of 1813 that is affecting the country, *this is very serious*. Our prestige is compromised. This morning, a patrol, in the Rheinstrasse, was followed by little children who whistled 'Deustchland über Alles'. And the impression of the average German is: 'Hey, we got them [*on les a eus*] yesterday and we will get them better tomorrow.'

He scoffed at the fact that there had been no collective fine or a declaration of a state of siege, just a 'ridiculous poster' informing the population that future incidents would not be tolerated. However, the author was at pains to state that:

> I am not among those who badmouth 'the Boches' indiscriminately, but I feel that we cannot exaggerate the importance of the events of yesterday and that only an implacable but logically led repression will be able to reduce the effects. The Germans are mocking us in the streets and it is the first time [this is happening].[121]

For this Frenchman, as with others, Rhinelanders were once again using patriotic symbols to undermine French prestige and power, signifying a problematic attitude that explained more explicit and physical forms of opposition to the French presence. The beginnings of organized German resistance seemed like a tipping point for the prestige-conscious French, exacerbating the concerns that had previously been shared by military and civilian French authorities alike; for the rest of 1923 at least, the earlier more sporadic (and likely spontaneous) symbolic opposition combined with co-ordinated resistance to undermine France's victorious and dominant position further. Even when faced with more tangible opposition, the French continued to monitor, respond to and worry about alleged symbolic attacks on French prestige and dignity beyond work stoppages and demonstrations in and of themselves. Thus, the impact of the Ruhr occupation was to extend and exacerbate the existing tensions between occupier and occupied

119 AN, AJ/9/5229/A, HCITR report on the incidents in Mainz, 15 February 1923.
120 AN, AJ/9/5229/A, Tirard, Instructions aux délégués supérieurs, 25 January 1923.
121 AN, AJ/9/5229/A, personal reflection on events in Mainz, 25 January 1923.

in the Rhineland, but it did not reconfigure the French understanding of their situation—and did not represent a uniquely novel arena of contestation to be studied in isolation.

V

This brief examination of French sensitivity to national symbols in the occupied Rhineland leads to a few suggestive conclusions. First, the detailed investigations into incidents where either French symbols were allegedly insulted or where locals mobilized German symbols against the French demonstrate that, even if these cases were less common than acts of physical violence committed by occupier or occupied, they were taken just as seriously. They also tell us that the French certainly expected and felt anti-French sentiment in the Rhineland between 1920 and 1923, even if it was not held by all Rhinelanders; but, significantly, that it existed before the occupation of the Ruhr. Such an attitude amongst certain locals may explain, in part, why the passive resistance campaign found such fertile ground in 1923, as well as provide information as to how and why physical acts of resistance/opposition carried out by locals took place, speaking to a wider climate of opposition amongst at least some sections of Rhenish society. Yet the French attitude also speaks to the key notion of prestige, and analogous concepts of dignity and authority, whereby the power of France both within the Rhineland and on the global stage had to be respected—and the French flag in particular provided a means through which to demonstrate or attack this power and dominance symbolically. This notion was linked to French self-understanding as victors, and perhaps a sense of insecurity about this status. It further raised questions about how the French occupation administrators should act in a period of peace and eventually in a period of potential violence, as with the onset of the passive resistance campaign. The importance of prestige outlined in this article also links to a colonial mindset and sense of 'civilizing mission' that was at the least implicitly visible in certain aspects of the administration of the Rhineland, and clear in the policy of peaceful penetration—but, paradoxically, sometimes defending prestige seemed to undermine this policy. These ideas themselves informed other aspects of French policy as well as daily interactions between occupier and occupied. However, this, like many points raised here, is worthy of further research. What can be asserted conclusively is that the Rhineland represented a peacetime battleground where, beyond wider propaganda campaigns and physical violence, national symbols offered a means of asserting and undermining dominance for occupier and occupied alike.