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# ‘Degrees of Foreignness’ and the Construction of Identity in French Border Regions during the Interwar Period

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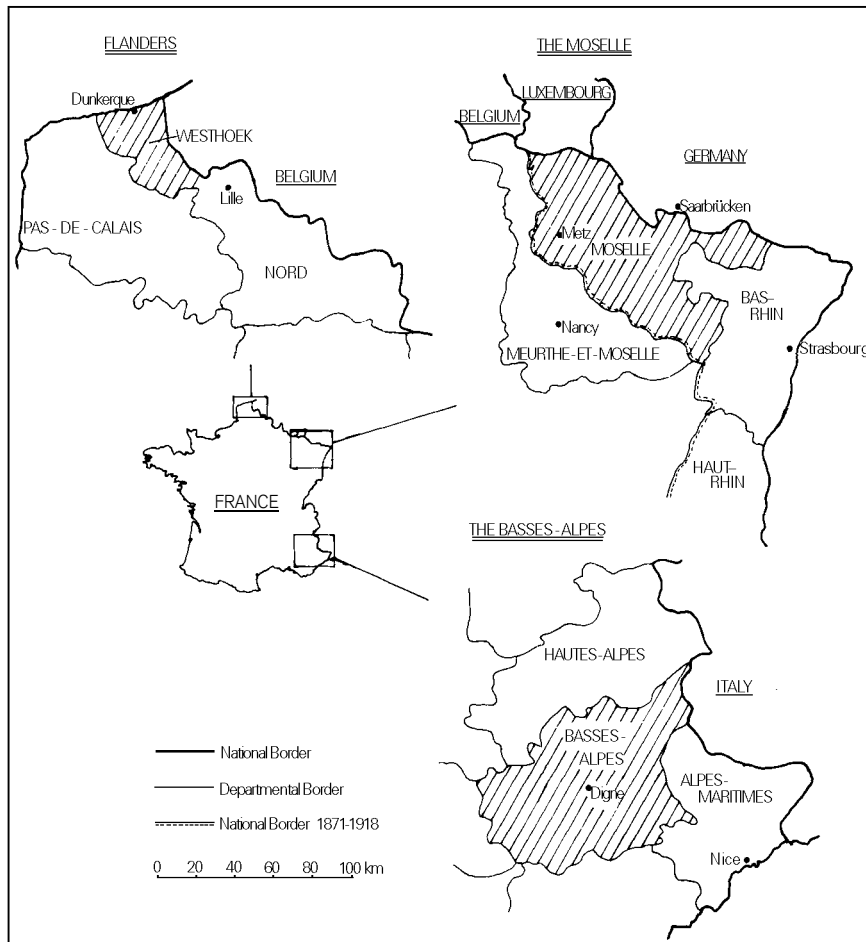
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Border regions are a fertile, if complex, investigative terrain for historians interested in the concept of identity. Demographic and social relationships within such areas are commonly both variegated and more fluid than in central areas, and hence expressions of identity often prove to be correspondingly composite. Historians such as Eugen Weber have claimed that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries national identity was disseminated to the peripheral regions of France through a top-down infiltration and imposition of elite values on the mass of the population through schools, the penetration of roads and railways, military service and political propaganda, and that this incursion of national identity was resisted and impeded by the persistence of regional sentiment and culture and by poor relations between these border areas and the national centre.<sup>1</sup> More recent regional studies view the gradual adoption of national identity as a two-way process of negotiation, and posit the coexistence of overlapping local and national identities.<sup>2</sup> Some historians have even reached conclusions virtually the opposite of those of Weber – that in fact regional communities were keen to make economic and administrative demands of central authorities based on the legitimacy of a shared national identity.<sup>3</sup> Nor is the centre–periphery relationship the only variable to be considered in assessing the

<sup>1</sup> Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernisation of Rural France 1870–1914* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1979). See also Jack Hayward, *The One and Indivisible French Republic* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Caroline Ford, *Creating the Nation in Provincial France: Religion and Political Identity in Brittany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Barnett Singer, *Village Notables in Nineteenth-Century France: Priests, Mayors, Schoolmasters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983); James R. Lehning, *Peasant and French: Cultural Contact in Rural France During the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Timothy Baycroft, ‘Changing Identities in the Franco-Belgian Borderland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries’, *French History*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (December 1999), 417–38.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Sahlins, ‘The Nation in the Village: State-Building and Communal Struggles in the Catalan Borderland during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries’ *Journal of Modern History*, 60 (June 1988), 234–63. See also Sahlins, *Boundaries. The making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).



Outline map of France with details of the Basses-Alpes, Flanders and Moselle border regions.

construction of identity. Perceptions of identity in outlying regions can be further muddled by the constant flux of immigration and, indeed, borders themselves can be subject to change – often independently of the wishes of local inhabitants – creating ever more complex demographic eddies and forcibly altering the norms of self-definition.

This article is an attempt to trace, via comparative analysis, the evolution of identity in three very different border regions of France during the interwar period, in order to seek out any common patterns arising out of the similarities of border experiences. The Basses-Alpes (now the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence) was a quiet, rural department whose border with Italy was formed by the natural frontier of the Alps. French Flanders was, in contrast, both prosperous and populous, and although the border was a political construct, it had been fixed and stable from the early nineteenth century. The Moselle was in many ways a special case, since the region,

along with Alsace, had only just been returned to French sovereignty following nearly fifty years of German annexation. Yet, despite these differences, it is possible to trace similarities in the evolution of various identities within each region during the period. In each case national identity vied with some form of regional sentiment, and a complex, often strained relationship developed between local periphery and national centre. The labour demands of reconstruction and rapid modernisation also necessitated the importation of foreign labour on a large scale into each region. New state-sponsored schemes introduced to facilitate this importation often ruptured traditional patterns of migration and meant that immigrant labour was more diverse and more 'visible' than ever before.<sup>4</sup> This influx had a pronounced effect on the demarcation of identity in each case. The ideal-type model of French national identity as 'civic' (as opposed to the German 'ethnic' form) has been widely disseminated, with the result that national identity in the French case is often perceived as intrinsically 'inclusive'.<sup>5</sup> In fact, it will be argued that the republican tradition of political inclusiveness did not preclude perceptions of a racial 'hierarchy'.<sup>6</sup> The inhabitants of the regions defined themselves through a series of relationships with and attitudes towards several differentiated 'others': those from just across the border, those living in the region but coming from further away, and those from 'the centre' of France. A hierarchy of 'degrees of foreignness' developed, against which national and regional identities were conceived. The regions will be considered separately, examining the kinds of attitudes which were formed towards each group of 'others' within the specific regional context, before turning to some general conclusions.

### The Basses-Alpes

At first glance the Basses-Alpes is not an obvious region in which to study the relationship between borders and the construction of identity. In the early twentieth century, as now, this mountainous border department was quiet, rural and in many ways unremarkable. Yet the convergence of two specific factors during the interwar

<sup>4</sup> For a general analysis of these trends see Jeanne Singer-Kérel, 'Foreign workers in France, 1891–1936', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (July 1991), 279–93. See also Gary S. Cross, 'To Assimilate or Regulate: French Immigration Policy in the 1920s', *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1982), 1–20; and Cross, *Immigrant Workers in Industrial France* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (London: Harvard University Press, 1994); and Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991), 99–142. For a critical discussion of the ethnic/civic framework see Dominique Schnapper, 'Beyond the opposition: 'civic' nation versus 'ethnic' nation', and Anthony D. Smith, 'Civic and ethnic nationalism revisited: analysis and ideology', *The ASEN Bulletin*, No. 12 (Autumn/Winter 1996/7), 4–8 and 9–11.

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of such perceptions, see William Schneider, 'Hérédité, Sang et Opposition à l'immigration dans la France des Années Trente', *Ethnologie Française*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (1994), 104–17. For contemporary views on the assimilation qualities of specific nationalities see, inter alia, Georges Mauco, *Les Etrangers en France. Leur rôle dans l'activité économique* (Paris: Colin, 1932), 550. Also, Charles Lambert, *La France et les Etrangers. Dépopulation, Immigration et Naturalisation* (Paris: Delagrave, 1928), 75.

period – a long-standing problem of depopulation and the disruption of traditional immigration patterns – gave the area a brief and particular relevance.

The Basses-Alpes had always been a particularly sparsely populated department, yet a combination of outmigration and an excess of deaths over births meant that the region had lost over 65 per cent of its native inhabitants between 1830 and 1930. Population density in the department was only 12 inhabitants per square kilometre, while in the neighbouring Bouches-du-Rhône this figure was as high as 233.<sup>7</sup> Concern over such a rapidly diminishing population had meant that the arrival of foreigners, particularly Italians from across the border, was often viewed as a source of provincial rejuvenation, both economic and demographic.<sup>8</sup> Population scarcity enabled the department to side-step the issues of economic competition afflicting more industrial immigration regions, while the wide dispersal of immigrants necessitated by the department's rural, mountainous geography largely precluded the social problems found in more crowded border regions such as the Alpes-Maritimes.<sup>9</sup>

However, this placid equilibrium was gradually eroded during the interwar period by a nationwide shift away from localised border immigration towards the large-scale, organised importation of migrant labour from further afield. Immigration into the Basses-Alpes between the wars gradually became diversified and variegated, and the different groups of foreigners arriving in the region were by no means treated equally. Immigrants were increasingly divided into two 'tiers' – Italians from across the border who had a long history of organic, cross-border migration into the region – and 'others', imported en masse from further afield as the result of state-sponsored labour programmes. The attitudes of the inhabitants of the Basses-Alpes towards these two different (albeit nebulously defined) groupings provides a useful matrix via which to analyse the role of the border in the construction of identity, both local and national.

Italians, especially Alpine Italians, had been present in the department since records began. Pierre George, among others, has charted a distinct migration route between the Basses-Alpes and the province of Coni, a link which became particularly pronounced given that 'the French side of the Alps became depopulated much sooner than the Italian side'.<sup>10</sup> Italian migrants formed almost 10 per cent of the population of the department immediately prior to the First World War and were widely dispersed topographically. Heavy reliance on Italian labour, both seasonal and permanent, was a key feature of the region's agricultural economy in particular. Writing of the border arrondissement of l'Ubaye, the prefect noted 'the importance of the Italian community which numbers 900 permanent residents,

<sup>7</sup> 'Tableaux statistiques annuels de la population du département établis lors des dénombrements de 1836 à 1936', Archives Départementales des Alpes de Haute Provence (ADAHP), 6M 193.

<sup>8</sup> For further information on the impact of demographic anxiety on French society see Richard Tomlinson, 'The 'Disappearance' of France, 1896–1940: French Politics and the Birth Rate', *The Historical Journal*, vol. 28 (1985), 405–15.

<sup>9</sup> See Ralph Schor, *L'Opinion Française et les Etrangers, 1919–1939* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1985).

<sup>10</sup> Pierre George, 'L'Immigration Italienne en France de 1920 à 1939: Aspects Démographiques et Sociaux', in Milza ed., *Les Italiens en France de 1914 à 1940* (Paris: de Bocard, 1986), 49.

not including a minimum of 1,200 labourers who visit the arrondissement for several months during the summer'.<sup>11</sup> A local mayor also remarked that many of these seasonal labourers returned 'every summer, often to the same employer'.<sup>12</sup> While not nearly as extensive as the cross-border commuting which developed in Flanders or the Moselle, such patterns of employment indicate a high degree of familiarity extending across the border. Yet Italian labour in the department was far from merely seasonal. Permanent residency was also common with many Italians owning farms or agricultural smallholdings on a scale sufficient to attract central government attention. A survey commissioned by the Ministry of the Interior in 1922 noted that a substantial number of farms in the department were owned by Italian *propriétaires* or leased to *métayers* (tenant farmers).<sup>13</sup> The average size of these holdings was 25 hectares (c. 60 acres), but they ranged in size up to 130 hectares (over 300 acres). These were fairly sizeable properties to be held in foreign hands, and in many cases ownership dated back more than half a century. While not perhaps so extensive as the 35–40 per cent of land supposedly held in foreign hands in Gers,<sup>14</sup> such patterns of ownership are again indicative of strong cross-border linkages and permanent migration over an extended time period.

The blending of social and economic concerns across the border was further facilitated by the 'carte frontalière' system, a special identity card regime operating in certain areas and the result of a Franco-Italian accord signed in 1918, 'inspired by the desire to strengthen the bonds of friendship and to multiply the neighbourly ties which unite Italy and France'. Unusually, central government actions here served to strengthen regional, cross-border integration. Specific 'zones frontalières' were delineated and the residents of these zones were entitled to hold 'cartes frontalières' which enabled them to cross the border into neighbouring districts freely, without the normal administrative restrictions.

Regional identification was far from merely administrative, however, as evidenced by the reaction of French public opinion in the department to the Italo-Ethiopian conflict of 1935. Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia aroused widespread censure in Europe, and France quickly joined the United Kingdom in imposing sanctions. Although events initially evoked 'a certain level of anxiety' among residents of the Basses-Alpes, the prefect soon observed that 'the majority of the population is openly critical of the government's position . . . and regrets the application of sanctions'. He eventually concluded that 'this demonstrates the Italophile attitudes held by the majority of the population'.<sup>15</sup> Rather than side with their central government against the threat of fascism, the majority of the French population of the region focused on the potential disruption sanctions would inevitably cause to their daily routine.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Prefect to Consul Générale d'Italie à Marseille, late 1919, ADAHP, 4M 54.

<sup>12</sup> Commissionnaire to Prefect, 8 June 1933, ADAHP, 10M 20.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Schor, *L'Opinion Française*, 440.

<sup>15</sup> Monthly Reports, March 1936, ADAHP, 4M 20.

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted, however, that support for sanctions was probably far from unanimous

Perhaps the most persuasive proof of the feeling of fraternity existing between French and Italians in the region is the readiness of local officials to naturalise long-term Italian residents. The Basses-Alpes naturalised a comparatively high percentage of its immigrant residents, and the vast majority were Italians. Many had intermarried with the local population, although even bachelors were perceived as intrinsically assimilable.<sup>17</sup> As a sub-prefect expressed the sentiment, 'these individuals who come almost exclusively from the northern Italian provinces are, in the great majority of cases, excellent recruits'.<sup>18</sup> He thought that 'speaking French perfectly, *as well as the haut-provençal dialect*', and 'having with the populations of this region certain affinities of race, they are predisposed towards a quick and easy assimilation'. Such perceptions were common in the region but meant that attitudes towards immigrants from less favoured nationalities arriving in the region were often far from cordial.

Up until the First World War almost all immigration into France (86 per cent in 1911) was from countries with land borders with France.<sup>19</sup> During the interwar period immigration gradually lost this localised character. A pressing labour shortage led to the signing of a series of reciprocal treaties to facilitate the rapid importation of cheap labour from further afield, particularly from the Slav nations of eastern Europe. By 1931 the proportion of immigrants arriving from neighbouring countries had fallen to 58 per cent.<sup>20</sup> Even in the rural Basses-Alpes the development of new industrial sites meant the importation of foreign labour. Some came from eastern Europe, particularly Poland, but others from as far afield as Chile, Haiti, China and Egypt. From the outset there was resistance in the area to such new arrivals, particularly on the part of officials and local employers. One report referred to the 'large influx . . . into the department . . . of north Africans', sent by central placement offices, most of whom were 'unspecialised workers with no particular profession'. Although some did eventually find work it was claimed that 'the populace is worried by these comings and goings . . . due to the potential for unrest which could eventually disturb the public order'. Such arrivals were perceived as potentially troublesome due to 'their peculiarly excitable temperament'.<sup>21</sup> One particular consortium of construction companies systematically refused to hire such workers. When questioned, a director claimed that north Africans, 'more than all others have difficulties in adapting to the Alpine climate'.

Given the clear preference for Alpine Italian labour cited above, it is perhaps

nationally. Although no opinion polls exist it is likely that support was split along political fault lines. See Anthony Adamthwaite, *Grandeur and Misery. France's bid for power in Europe 1914–1940* (London: Arnold, 1995), 198.

<sup>17</sup> See Jean-Charles Bonnet, 'Naturalisations et révisions de naturalisations de 1927 à 1944: L'exemple du Rhône', *Le Mouvement Social*, No. 98 (1977), 44–75.

<sup>18</sup> Sub Prefect to Prefect, 25 July 1931, ADAHP, 6M 28.

<sup>19</sup> Gérard Noiriel, *Population, Immigration et Identité Nationale en France, XIX<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1992), 70.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 70. Current figures for the origin of immigrants show that 47 per cent are European, 38 per cent Maghrébin and 8 per cent Asian.

<sup>21</sup> Prefectorial Report, 27 Jan. 1937, ADAHP, 4M 20.

possible to discern a certain sense of regional identity in such resistance to the efforts of central authorities to import labour from further afield. In May 1933, for example, the prefect received via the Ministry of the Interior a request from the director of l'Office Palestinien, a Parisian charitable labour organisation bureau assisting exiled German Jews 'by finding them agricultural employment in France'. Earlier the same year the prefect had written to the Minister of the Interior lamenting the lack of agricultural labour in the region, which was presumably why the request was forwarded to him. However, in his reply to l'Office Palestinien he claimed that 'the current agricultural crisis makes placement within this professional category very difficult'. In internal correspondence on the matter, he further noted that 'the customs, language and mentality of German labourers stand in the way of any assimilation, however slow, into the rural culture of our region', and that he was convinced that 'the farmers of the Basses-Alpes would only agree to employ these refugees with strong reservations and under duress'.<sup>22</sup>

So, the divergent perceptions surrounding Italians and other, principally non-European, immigrants in the Basses-Alpes raise a number of interesting questions. To what extent did 'regional identity' muddy the issues surrounding the identification of self/other in the department? What is the role of the border in the definition of national identity if 'degrees of foreignness' exist and those from just across the border are considered 'less foreign' than other arrivals? And finally, in what ways did all of this affect the relationship between the regional periphery and the French centre?

The cursory reading of the situation outlined above certainly seems to suggest that regional identity was an important component within the social transactions of everyday life in the Basses-Alpes. Issues of 'ethnicity' – language, dialect, culture and custom – took precedence over the strict demarcation of national identity and preconfigured an acceptance of Alpine Italians within the Basses-Alpes by local employers, government officials and public opinion alike. This regional solidarity becomes yet more visible when contrasted with the wariness surrounding the arrival of eastern Europeans and north Africans. Both local authorities and *patrons* were resistant to the centralised importation of non-Italian labour into the department and certainly where economic matters were concerned, regional identity was of more consequence than national affiliation and the distinction in self-perception imposed by the French–Italian border seems limited at best. However, while unquestionably true to an extent, such an interpretation is perhaps somewhat misleading in its austerity. Three specific criticisms readily present themselves.

First, it is overly simplistic to claim that new workers imported from further afield were resented merely for being 'more foreign'. While influential, issues of language and culture were not the only considerations affecting perceptions of assimilation. Demographic factors, modes of arrival and patterns of dispersal must also be taken into account. For example, Italian immigration was largely unstructured and had evolved over time, allowing space for local attitudes to adjust. Italian

<sup>22</sup> Exchange of letters dated April/May 1933, ADAHP, 10M 20.



immigrants were thus far more dispersed within the region than newer arrivals, who were often concentrated in highly conspicuous, purpose-built industrial housing. Italians were also more likely to move 'en famille', whereas a high percentage of the newer national groups was made up of young, single men – a social type with an obvious predisposition to certain anti-social activities. All these factors have to be weighed alongside 'regional solidarity' in defining the idea of 'tiers of acceptance' of immigrant groups.

A second point relates to the very existence of a coherent 'regional' identity. It is possible to argue that it was not so much a regional identity which existed in the Basses-Alpes as a willingness to accept and profit from Italian labour crossing the border. For example, the 'carte frontalière' system would seem to indicate close economic ties across the border. In practice, the arrangement was uni-directional. In 1935 the prefect noted that 'no French workers are employed in the Italian border region.'<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the manifestations of solidarity relating to the imposition of sanctions after the invasion of Ethiopia were perhaps inspired primarily by fears of losing the economic boon of Italian labour. The prefect here noted that the 'feelings of sympathy for Italy' had arisen essentially 'for economic reasons'.<sup>24</sup> Certainly the readiness to naturalise long-term Italian residents was prompted more by economic self-interest than cross-border identification. Official comments on application forms such as 'he is a good agricultural worker and agriculture needs manpower' were common, while those candidates not fulfilling specific criteria of usefulness, however well assimilated, were consistently denied citizenship.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, while it can perhaps still be argued that the proximity of the national border and the importance of distinctions of national identity played little part in the everyday life of the department, clearly this was not an invariable rule. Regional sympathy for Alpine Italians (even if motivated by economic avarice) was strong, but national identity was stronger still and as the interwar period developed central government politics increasingly assumed centre-stage. French-Italian international relations, which had been quite cordial following the Rome Accord of June 1935,<sup>26</sup> gradually deteriorated, and Mussolini's 1938 territorial claims on Nice catapulted the south-eastern French periphery into the limelight. On the Italian side of the border the fascist authorities gradually became overtly hostile to emigration, seasonal as well as permanent, and Blackshirts maintained a stringent surveillance of the Alpine passes from the late 1920s onwards. On the French side the construction of military fortifications along the border in the early 1930s progressively engendered attitudes of suspicion and mistrust of Italians among local officials.<sup>27</sup> Under such circumstances the presence of the border increasingly served to sharpen awareness of the

<sup>23</sup> Sub-Prefect, Barcelonnette to Prefect, 5 Feb. 1935, ADAHP, 4M 50.

<sup>24</sup> Prefect's Monthly Report, March 1936, ADAHP, 4M 20.

<sup>25</sup> 'Dossiers des étrangers naturalisés de 1892–1938' and 'Demandes de naturalisation ajournées ou rejetées de 1928 à 1934', ADAHP, 6M 30–40 and 6M 41.

<sup>26</sup> See Robert J. Young, 'French Military Intelligence and the Franco-Italian Alliance, 1933–1939', *The Historical Journal*, 28 (1985), 143–169.

<sup>27</sup> For further details of French military fortifications, see Adamthwaite, *Grandeur and Misery*, 150.



primacy of national identities and to enhance the perceived need for definition and demarcation.<sup>28</sup>

A national identity was by no means the only identity assumed by the residents of the Basses-Alpes between the wars, nor was it necessarily the strongest. In certain circumstances regional identification with Alpine Italians from across the border was clearly apparent, especially when the latter were juxtaposed alongside other, less familiar, arrivals. There is evidence of a consciousness of this regional identity in the efforts of local officials to resist the placement of non-Italian labour by central authorities. However, this sentiment should not be overstated. The Basses-Alpes may have been an isolated, rural department, but this was still the twentieth century. Increasingly, the political concerns of central government intruded into everyday life in the region and, when push came to shove, the primacy of national identity was by this stage readily apparent.

### **Flanders**

Unlike the Basses-Alpes, French Flanders is a border region which historically experienced large movements of people and was a focal point for French political, economic, social and military concerns for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Having been right at the front lines during the First World War, the region suffered much damage and alteration, and saw many new arrivals, and the population experienced a great deal of interaction with foreigners during the years of reconstruction which followed. The French-Flemish developed differentiated attitudes towards, and relationships with, three groups: the Belgians across the border, other foreigners, and the centre of France. The numerous changes and forced adaptation to circumstances made the interwar period a crucial time for identity formation in the region.

The specific area to be considered in this case study covers the Lille industrial basin and the adjoining area known in Flemish as the Westhoek, the northernmost part of the Département du Nord, running from the Lys river to the North Sea. The rural area of the Westhoek was high in population density, and had long since developed intensive, highly efficient agriculture with a large concentration of industrial crops such as sugar beet and flax. The Lille basin was one of the most developed industrial regions in France, particularly for textiles, with the coalmining areas of the Pas-de-Calais in close proximity. Numerous immigrants came to French Flanders from neighbouring Belgian Flanders as agricultural workers, and the Lille urban area attracted workers from the surrounding countryside on both sides of the border and also from further afield, leading to a large mixed population. The region's transportation links, including roads, rail, canals and the port of Dunkerque, were excellent, both to the rest of France and across the border to Belgium, making it an important centre for trade as well as industry.

<sup>28</sup> See Michael Miller, *Shanghai on the Métro. Spies, Intrigue and the French between the wars* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1994).

Socially and culturally, the French-Flemish shared a great deal with the Belgian-Flemish across the border, to the point that one could speak of a common regional culture. In terms of language, the Westhoek had become bilingual by the interwar period, but the language of daily life was still Flemish.<sup>29</sup> Within Lille, and also in neighbouring Tourcoing and especially Roubaix, Flemish also remained common in certain neighbourhoods. Flemish-language newspapers could be found on the French side of the border, both in the rural areas and in the Lille conurbation, serving essentially the Belgian immigrants, but also the native Flemish-speaking population of France. Cross-border marriages were still common, and close contact between the two 'Flemish' communities was maintained through leisure pursuits and socialising in cafés.<sup>30</sup>

In terms of migration patterns, while workers did both migrate and commute across the border in both directions, the majority of the movement was from Belgium into France. The tradition of Belgian workers seeking labour in France went back several generations and was a commonly accepted feature of the interwar demographic landscape. Belgians resident in France, concentrated primarily in the border region, formed the largest community of immigrants in France throughout much of the nineteenth century, falling to second place behind the Italian community in the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> Definitive and seasonal migration, extremely common in the nineteenth century, began to give way increasingly to weekly or daily commuting. Special transportation links had been set up by some factory owners as well as the Belgian government in order to provide the workers with the means to carry on living in Belgium while working in France.<sup>32</sup> The labour shortages which followed the First World War meant that Belgian workers were needed more than ever, and the pattern of recruitment continued. Seasonal workers numbered 40–50,000 in 1920, the same approximate figure as had been coming since 1870,<sup>33</sup> while numbers of cross-border commuters rose to a peak of 100,000 between 1926 and 1928.<sup>34</sup> The 'carte du travail' was introduced in 1928–9 in order to help control the Belgian wave, and it did reduce the totals somewhat (in 1930 there were 20,000 seasonal workers and 70,000 cross-border

<sup>29</sup> See J. Dewachter, 'Le recul du Flamand dans le Nord de la France depuis 1806', *1er Congrès International de Géographie Historique. Tome II Mémoires* (Bruxelles, 1931), 89–98; and for a discussion of language use in the Westhoek see Timothy Baycroft, 'Peasants into Frenchmen? The case of the Flemish in the North of France 1860–1914', *European Review of History/Revue européenne d'Histoire*, vol. 2 No. 1 (Spring 1995), 31–44.

<sup>30</sup> For information on cross-border marriages and contact see Yola Verhasselt, Frank Logie and Bernadette Mergaerts, 'Espace géographique et formes de sociabilité: quatre exemples de régions frontalières', *Revue de Nord (RN)* LXIV, No 253 (avril–juin 1982), 581–602.

<sup>31</sup> See Gérard Noiriel *The French Melting Pot: Immigration, Citizenship, and National Identity*, trans. Geoffroy de Laforcade (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 192.

<sup>32</sup> See F. Lentacker, 'Les frontaliers belges travaillant en France: Caractères et fluctuations d'un courant de main d'oeuvre', *RN*, XXXII (1950), 130–44; and also J. Theys, 'De evolutie van de grensarbeid tussen West Vlaanderen en Noord-Frankrijk in de 20ste eeuw', *De Fraanse Nederlanden/Les Pays-Bas Français*, 13 (1988), 89–104.

<sup>33</sup> Luc Schepens, 'Émigration saisonnière et émigration définitive en Flandre occidentale au XIXe siècle', *RN*, LVI (1974), 429.

<sup>34</sup> Lentacker, 'Les frontaliers belges', 137.

commuters).<sup>35</sup> The depression years and the increased unemployment brought by them also reduced the numbers of Belgian seasonal workers and commuters, but neither fundamentally changed the patterns of cross-border work nor removed the substantial presence of Belgian workers in the region. Direct confrontations between the 'French' and the 'Belgian' workers did occur, but they were relatively infrequent and sufficiently mild as to be without serious consequences in terms of identity formation or the deepening of any divide between groups of workers.<sup>36</sup>

In spite of the odd conflict, relations between the two population groups were generally harmonious and friendly, and the Belgians were not often held to be a 'threat' by the French. In fact, a great deal of co-operation occurred at the level of the workers' movement, the Belgian presence in French Flanders helping to increase the militancy of the trade unions and lending support to the socialists and communists.<sup>37</sup> Attesting further to this level of harmony, the prefect wrote to the Minister of the Interior in 1921 describing a series of pamphlets which expressed the depth of Franco-Belgian friendship.<sup>38</sup> By this time it had also become common to use the word 'foreigner' only to signify the workers who arrived from eastern and southern Europe and north Africa, referring to their cross-border neighbours not as foreign, but simply 'Belgian', suggesting a familiar otherness similar to the case of the Italians in the Basses-Alpes.<sup>39</sup>

The Belgians had always been recognised as 'other' to a certain extent. By the interwar period the Franco-Belgian border had been in existence in its current form for a century, and had found its way partially into local consciousness.<sup>40</sup> This was achieved primarily through the economic differences in wages and prices which developed in the nineteenth century, giving rise to the patterns of migration and labour discussed above, as well as through illegal smuggling. The illegal importation of goods from Belgium into France reached its peak in the interwar period, and brought the populations of either side together in a co-operative effort to get the goods across, while at the same time reinforcing the idea that the border was a real dividing line.<sup>41</sup> The relative economic success of the French side of the border also led the French-Flemish to be proud of the differences between themselves and their poorer neighbours. Thus while remaining on the best of terms socially, they began

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 138, and Schepens, 'Emigration saisonnière', 429.

<sup>36</sup> See Archives Départementales du Nord (ADN) M 624 6 for an example of such minor conflicts among port workers in Dunkerque.

<sup>37</sup> See Carl Strikwerda, 'Regionalism and Internationalism: The Working-Class Movement in the Nord and the Belgian Connection 1871–1914', in *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History*, Vol. 12 (1984), 221–30, for a full discussion of the relationship between the two groups in terms of the workers' movement, and also Gérard Noiriel, *Workers in French Society in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Oxford: Berg, 1990), 153.

<sup>38</sup> Prefect to the Minister, 5 January, 1921, ADN M 154 318. See also A Lorbert, *La France au travail: La région du Nord (Nord – Pas-de-Calais – Somme – Aisne)* (Paris: éditions Pierre Roger, 1927), on Franco-Belgian friendly relations.

<sup>39</sup> See Verhasselt *et al.*, 'Espace géographique', 593.

<sup>40</sup> The border was delineated in the 1820s, following the Treaty of Courtrai, and was not initially prominent in local consciousness; *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> See Albert Deveyer, *La Flandre d'autrefois* (Dunkerque: Westhoek-Editions, 1985), 127–37.

to look down on the Belgians (hence the origin of 'Belgian' jokes),<sup>42</sup> and their French identity became strengthened in the process.

The other foreign communities, including principally Italians, north Africans and Poles, were proportionately a great deal smaller and less important in French Flanders and the Lille industrial basin than that of the Belgians.<sup>43</sup> Sufficiently numerous to be identified, these foreigners did not integrate quite as quickly or easily as the Belgians, nor had they been coming to the region for as long a time, and as such re-emphasised both French identity and the privileged otherness of the Belgians. These groups were not, however, numerous enough in themselves to constitute a serious threat to the local community and did not arouse tremendous passions or antipathy among the French-Flemish at this time. Their relative position in terms of numbers, and the fact that before the interwar period the region had become quite used to large numbers of immigrants (even if mostly Belgian), combined with the relative prosperity, contributed to the lack of problems when it was compared with regions of France without such a long-standing tradition of large-scale immigration.<sup>44</sup> Although not leading to large-scale conflicts and rivalry, the visible presence in the region of two different groups of immigrants, 'Belgian' and 'foreign', each served to augment 'French' identity. The 'otherness' of the immigrants contributed to a greater sense of 'self'. The refinement of the conception of self and of Frenchness was also dependent upon the relationships with other Frenchmen, and between the region and the centre, to which we will now turn.

The relationship in French Flanders between regional and national identity was a complex one. The majority of the French-Flemish considered themselves to be both French and Flemish and saw no inherent contradiction in a dually conceived identity. They considered themselves to be French by nationality and Flemish by culture, and in this way had an affinity both with France and at the same time with the larger Flemish community which spanned the border and included others who were not French. In this way political and cultural identities were kept separate, if somewhat overlapping, although the membership groups they included were neither identical nor completely distinct. It was only in the twentieth century that political identity became sufficiently strong as to begin to overshadow cultural identity, in such a way as to lead the French-Flemish no longer to feel the same level of affinity with their Belgian neighbours across the border.<sup>45</sup>

Nothing awakens rural villages and urban working classes to the importance and implications of national and international politics than a long-drawn-out intense conflict on the scale of the First World War being fought in such proximity. The Lille industrial basin was occupied for the duration of the war, and the Westhoek, while not directly occupied, was in close proximity to the front. Many Frenchmen

<sup>42</sup> See Archives Nationales F 19 5502.

<sup>43</sup> Such groups of 'other', non-Belgian immigrants were more numerous in the neighbouring mining communities, as opposed to the Westhoek and the Lille industrial basin under discussion here.

<sup>44</sup> See Noiriel, *The French Melting Pot*.

<sup>45</sup> This trend, begun in the interwar period, continued and accelerated after the Second World War. For a full discussion see Baycroft, 'Changing Identities'.

from outside the region were brought into contact with the local population, and numerous French-Flemish families chose to remove themselves from the region of fighting and spent the war years living elsewhere in France, drawing closer to the French population in general and reinforcing their ties with France. During the years of reconstruction, local politicians lobbied Paris hard for further financial support in rebuilding their region, and it was extremely clear to the French-Flemish that the rebuilding was being carried out and paid for by France, and that the war had been about defending France. The necessity of lobbying the central government drew the inhabitants of the region closer to national politics, and the importance of national institutions in regional reconstruction had the effect of reinforcing the 'French' aspect of their identity.

The attitudes of the French-Flemish towards both the centre and 'other' Frenchmen were mixed. On the one hand, there was some gratitude for the aid received and increased affinity due to the closer proximity during the war years, but on the other hand there was resentment caused by their feeling ignored and under-appreciated. Lobbying the government never attracted the level of funding desired, and since the French-Flemish felt that they had sacrificed a great deal for France by having been at the front lines, this did not necessarily feel as appreciated by the rest of France as they would have liked (this was of course not exclusive to this region, but to the whole of the war zone). To the sense of abandonment after the war was added the feeling of not being completely listened to in matters of trade and tariff policy, which began in the years preceding the war, and was greatly intensified with the onset of the depression years. The agriculture and textile industries in French Flanders were particularly prone to competition (especially from Belgium), and the region was aware of the role of the centre of France in setting the policy, and was never completely satisfied (not unlike the Basses-Alpes). For both reconstruction and economic protection, therefore, the region was dependent on the centre. Awareness of the crucial role of the French nation (or its representatives) led to a love-hate relationship, partially characterised by resentment, but partly by appreciation, gratitude and identification. Thus, although there was a return to the prewar patterns of migration and sociability, political and hence national identity became stronger as a result of the incursion of the war, with the subsequent necessary period of reconstruction, and the increased desire for economic protection through tariffs and other controls. While identity based on regional cultural specificity did not disappear, it diminished in importance relative to developing national political awareness.

In conclusion, while the relative prosperity of the region and the long tradition of immigration meant that French Flanders was not a particularly xenophobic region, attitudes and reactions to immigration in French Flanders did contribute to the strengthening of French identity during the interwar period. A hierarchy of foreignness developed, with the Belgians, by far the most numerous immigrants, as familiarly foreign and not highly threatening, and other foreigners as more distinct. French identity in the region was also strengthened by the increased politicisation and dependency on the centre in the interwar years of reconstruction and

depression. French national identity had not yet entirely supplanted Flemish cultural identity as it would do after the Second World War, but the clarity of the divisions and national identification with reference to the border increased sharply during these years of upheaval.

### The Moselle

A shifting national border, dramatic demographic changes and divisions caused by a linguistic frontier all qualify the Moselle department of Lorraine for in-depth study of identity and concepts of foreignness in the interwar period. Changes to the Franco-German border brought about by the Treaty of Versailles in 1918, as well as changes to its departmental borders forty-seven years before, when parts of the Meurthe and Moselle departments, along with neighbouring Alsace, were annexed by Germany, make it something of a special case.<sup>46</sup> The Moselle's indigenous population, with its larger francophone community, heavy industry and particularist politics, also caused it to stand apart from neighbouring Alsace in the interwar period. However, a number of marked similarities to the Basses-Alpes and French Flanders emerge from the comparison.

In the early postwar period of integration into France, the Moselle and its population struggled to come to terms with new relationships in both regional and national contexts. A form of racial 'hierarchy' soon developed with populations originating from all surrounding regions as well as from eastern Europe, the Mediterranean and north Africa all living and working in the Moselle. Within the department, the population was divided by culture, language (the linguistic frontier ran from the north-west of the department to the south-east, dividing it in half), class and politics, as well as by urban, rural and industrial divides. Even the geography of the department failed to encourage a specifically Mosellan sense of community or belonging. However, neither had a specifically Alsace-Lorrainer identity developed in the light of annexation. In fact, instead of turning to Alsace and drawing upon the shared experience of annexation, Mosellans had grown to resent Alsatian dominance in Germany's *Reichsland* (imperial territory), Elsaß-Lothringen. Strasbourg had become the administrative and political capital, leading many Mosellans to consider themselves to be 'under the Alsatian yoke'. As the newspaper, *Le Messin*, emphasised in 1920; 'There is no Alsace-Lorraine; this word only exists in the Treaty of Frankfurt.'<sup>47</sup> The events of 1918 seemed to bring a chance of shrugging off this dominance. However, maintenance of the *Reichsland* format until 1925 for administrative reasons meant relations across the border with Alsace remained tense as French sovereignty struggled to assert itself. Alsatians living

<sup>46</sup> In 1871, the department of the Moselle gained the arrondissements of Château Salins and Sarrebourg from the Meurthe region and lost the arrondissement of Briey. Alsace remained largely intact, although the arrondissement of Belfort remained French after 1871. The union of Alsace with Lorraine, however, was regarded by most within the regions as artificial.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in the 'Bulletin de presse Alsacienne', 1 April 1920, ADBR 121 AL 162.

in the Moselle, therefore, were regarded as a group apart within the Moselle's population.

Relations with neighbouring Luxembourg and the Saarland were, perhaps surprisingly, better than those with Alsace. In recent decades the term Sar-Lor-Lux has emerged for this informal union of regions which scholars increasingly describe as a form of *pays*, a region without clearly defined borders or limits.<sup>48</sup> As in the Basses-Alpes and French Flanders, and even before the use of the term Sar-Lor-Lux came into popular usage, the cross-border relationship between these three regions was defined by strong economic and industrial links and most prominently by the exchange of large numbers of cross-border workers. For 47 years workers in the Saarland and the Moselle had lived and worked in the same national context. In some cases, coal mines around Forbach extended under both the Saarland and the Moselle. Beyond such industrial links, the regions were related by culture, folklore and language, the multitude of local Germanic dialects forming loose links across the region. As the historian François Roth states; 'The frontier was a special area, very permeable where exchanges were constant.'<sup>49</sup>

Cross-border workers from Luxembourg were employed in the area to the north of Thionville, while Saarlanders worked around Forbach and Sarreguemines. As in French Flanders, such commuters were seen as part of the Moselle's industrial landscape and were generally accepted by the local populations as an economic necessity, even during the interwar period when anti-German sentiment was strong. However, with the exception of the workplace, contact between the indigenous population and these *travailleurs frontaliers* was minimal. And although the Saarland was governed as a League of Nations territory by France for much of the interwar period, it still considered itself part of Germany, as the plebiscite of 1935 showed. The broader issues of interwar Franco-German antagonism, with the new position of the national border, were to override pre-existing regional relationships. Saarlanders, despite regional affiliations, were viewed by Mosellans as Germans and therefore as foreign.

The relationship between *indigènes* and Germans actually living in the Moselle at the end of the First World War was complex, to say the least. Aside from Saarlanders who crossed in and out of the Moselle on a daily basis, a very sizeable German population had emigrated to the Moselle during annexation from all over the German Reich. Between 1910 and 1926 their numbers fell from 164,502 (25 per cent of the population) to 32,520 (5.1 per cent).<sup>50</sup> This considerable drop resulted largely from departures brought about by the outcome of the war (military

<sup>48</sup> See Christiane Rolland-May, 'Les espaces géographiques flous', Ph.D. dissertation, Metz, 1984.

<sup>49</sup> François Roth, 'Les relations économiques entre la Lorraine et le territoire de la Sarre, 1918–1935', in *Revue d'Allemagne* (October–December, 1993), 507–22, 521.

<sup>50</sup> For a full discussion of the departure of Germans from the Moselle between 1918 and 1921, see Carolyn Grohmann, 'The Problems of Integrating Annexed Lorraine into France, 1918–1925', Ph.D. dissertation, Stirling, 1999, Chapter 6 *passim*. Figures are taken from the national censuses operated in 1910 by the German authorities and 1926 by the French authorities, *Annuaire Statistique (Bas-Rhin, Haut-Rhin, Moselle). Premier volume – 1919 à 1931*, 36.



personnel and civil servants were among the first ordered to leave) and from a policy of *épuración* introduced by the French military and civilian authorities on their arrival in the province in November 1918.<sup>51</sup> This policy sought to remove all unreliable, anti-French elements from the population. Classification of the population according to ethnic origins, at odds with the French republican tradition of *jus solis*,<sup>52</sup> assisted the authorities in this process by grouping all Germans and Austro-Hungarians in a separate category. In the early stages, the policy took on some of the characteristics of a witch-hunt, driving not only ethnic Germans across the new national border, but Mosellans and Alsations accused of collaborating with the Germans during the war. *Epuración* was also a response to the feeling in France and, to a certain extent, within the Moselle that no Germans, or *Boches* as they were known, should remain on French soil following Germany's defeat.<sup>53</sup> This feeling was most acute between 1918 and 1921.

Classification and *épuración* of the Moselle meant in the short term that Germans were set apart and viewed as 'undesirable'. Most faced deportation either through the expulsion process or through voluntary repatriation. However, two factors defined the limits to deportation proceedings. First, it was not long before the economic consequences of the departure of such a large section of the department's population were felt. 'Are we to ruin our province by depriving it of its shopkeepers, its industrialists, its workers?' asked the usually francophile newspaper, *Le Messin*, in May 1919.<sup>54</sup> In particular, skilled German workers were needed to keep the factories and mines running at a time when their French equivalents could not always be found. Léon Mirman, *commissaire général* of the Moselle in 1918–19, conceded that the expulsion of any German worker should not occur without taking into consideration his 'economic usefulness'.<sup>55</sup> In fact, German workers were described by one employer as 'disciplined, often specialised, and satisfactory',<sup>56</sup> sentiments which were echoed by local employers in other areas. As in the Basses-Alpes, a readiness to allow certain Germans to remain and subsequently to allow carefully controlled numbers of naturalisations following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, was based in many cases upon economic self-interest and the recognition that Germans were hard workers and good employees.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>51</sup> A number of Germans were also naturalised following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, although exactly how many is not clear from official statistics.

<sup>52</sup> Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood*, Ch. 5, *passim*.

<sup>53</sup> For a recent discussion of this issue in Alsace see David Allen Harvey, 'Lost Children or Enemy Aliens? Classifying the Population of Alsace after the First World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (October 1999), 537–54.

<sup>54</sup> *Le Messin*, 2 May 1919, quoted in Pierre Brasme, 'Expulsions et Rapatriements d'Allemands de Moselle au lendemain de la Première Guerre Mondiale (1918–1921)', *Bulletin de liaison de l'association nationale de la bataille de Verdun et de la sauegarde de ses hauts lieux*, No. 18 (1991), 53–59.

<sup>55</sup> Archives Départementales de la Moselle (ADM), 26 Z 26.

<sup>56</sup> ADM, 320 M 50. Report to the *commissaire central* in Metz of 14 June 1925.

<sup>57</sup> Alsation workers were the most unpopular in the Moselle, since they were the most likely to antagonise the new French authorities. On a number of occasions they were reported singing German songs at the tops of their voices, 'which was more out of a spirit of contradiction than of German

Secondly, the indigenous and German populations had, during the half-century of annexation, learnt to accept each other to one extent or another. The result had been a steady pattern of marriages between the two communities, a pattern which did not significantly cease with the return of the Moselle to France in 1918. During the 1920s, despite the policy of *épuration* and the departure of many thousands of Germans, such marriages continued to account for a half to three-quarters of all marriages between *indigènes* and foreigners.<sup>58</sup> Luxembourgers and Belgians (grouped together in the official statistics) were the second most likely to marry members of the indigenous population. While Germans remained the largest single group among foreigners in the region up to 1926, Italians and Poles greatly outnumbered Belgians and Luxembourgers.<sup>59</sup> In fact, Germans, Luxembourgers and Belgians took on the same role as Italians in the Basses-Alpes, appearing less foreign than workers who had been imported en masse from further afield to serve the needs of industry and the economy. Linguistic and cultural reasons account for this as well as the nature of recruitment from Italy and eastern Europe, which encouraged the arrival of unskilled, male workers who tended to be more footloose than those arriving with families. Annexation by Germany, placing the Moselle within the Reich for almost half a century, had made Germans more familiar and less foreign. French attempts in the short term to purify or cleanse (*épurer*) the region of Germans, while genuinely supported by many Mosellans, could not completely erase the long-term effects of annexation which, for certain sections of society, had been positive.

While in the interwar period the continuing presence of small numbers of Germans was tolerated, the same tolerance was not shown to the arrival of those from the French interior, especially those from the Meurthe-et-Moselle. Some in the Moselle hoped the return to France would bring about the emergence of a greater Lorrainer identity. However, the break-up of the region between 1871 and 1918, during which period both French Lorraine and German Lorraine had grown to accept the permanency of German annexation, meant that their reunion was deeply problematic. In 1871 Nancy had slipped comfortably into the role of capital of Lorraine and by 1918 it was unwilling to give up any of its privileges to Metz. Nowhere is this more clearly stated than in the lengthy address by the *conseil municipal* of Nancy to the French government, entitled 'Defence of the interests of Nancy', published on 11 January 1919.<sup>60</sup> Time spent apart since the Franco-Prussian war had created a distance which could not be bridged easily, so that petty jealousies persisted long after the regions were reunited. As the politician Paul Durand

patriotism', according to the *commissaire spécial* in Thionville. ADM, 301 M 69. Report of 30 August 1919.

<sup>58</sup> *Annuaire Statistique (Bas-Rhin, Haut-Rhin, Moselle). Premier volume – 1919 à 1931*, 'Mariages entre Français et étrangers suivant la nationalité des étrangers', 55. See also Claude Precheur, *La Lorraine sidérurgique* (Paris: S.A.B.R.I., 1959), 564.

<sup>59</sup> The high number of workers originating from eastern Europe falls in with the overall interwar pattern of immigration from countries not bordering France. Noiriel, *Population, Immigration et Identité Nationale*, 70.

<sup>60</sup> Château de Vincennes, 6 N 154.

commented in 1969; 'While the Lorraine of today exists geographically, this Lorraine has no shared history.'<sup>61</sup>

In fact, such was the distance created during their years apart, Lorrainers arriving in the Moselle after 1918 were grouped together with all other *Français de l'intérieur*. Surprisingly, pro-French sentiment and a very particular (if somewhat out of date) sense of French identity felt by certain groups of *indigènes*, produced no discernible feeling of empathy towards these incoming French, most of whom, in the initial stages, were military personnel or civil servants. A sense of deception on both sides undoubtedly lay at the heart of the matter. War-time propaganda had led the French to expect a region full of staunch French patriots who had heroically resisted Germanisation. Equally, they were not prepared for the linguistic gulf which lay between them and the majority of the native population which spoke German or Germanic dialects. They clearly arrived with the presumption that national sentiment followed language. The *indigènes*, on the other hand, had been led to believe that a return to French sovereignty would be accompanied by respect for the region's special religious practices, local dialects, and laws, as well as a reward for their ongoing loyalty to France throughout annexation and the war. General Mangin, at the head of the liberating forces in the Moselle had, after all, promised, 'your families and your property will be protected; your institutions and your traditions will be respected.'<sup>62</sup> A failure to keep these promises, and the attempt by the *Cartel des gauches* in 1924 to remove, among other things, the concordatory system which Germany had left intact in both the Moselle and Alsace, led to disillusionment and the consolidation of a *malaise lorrain*. *Français de l'intérieur*, as representatives of the French state, were accused of rushing the integration process by 'applying' a centralised version of French identity, of gross insensitivity towards the indigenous population and of continuing to favour Strasbourg and Alsatians over Metz and Mosellans. Worse still, incoming French civil servants were seen, in many cases, as being more foreign and more unwelcome, than Saarlanders, Luxembourgers, or even Italians. As a result, they were just as unpopular as their German predecessors, as an anonymous letter sent to the Commissioners office in Metz suggested. 'By the police we are treated even worse than when the Boches were here.'<sup>63</sup>

Undoubtedly, between 1871 and 1918 both France and the Moselle had changed dramatically so that there was little chance their reunion after the First World War would be straightforward. This reunion saw the introduction of a republican form of national identity to the Moselle which was as unfamiliar to Mosellans as German national identity had been during annexation. Surprisingly, though, despite poor relations with *Français de l'intérieur*, Mosellans were already predisposed towards France. For some, a long-standing loyalty to France, dictated largely by a shared

<sup>61</sup> Pierre Barral, *L'esprit lorrain: Cet accent singulier du patriotisme français* (Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 1989), 175.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in René Weiss, *Le Premier Voyage Officiel en Alsace-Lorraine Française, 8, 9, 10 Décembre 1918* (Paris, 1919), 37.

<sup>63</sup> ADM, 304 M 1. Letter of 28 May 1919. This letter, as with many others, was anonymous, since any criticism of France could be punished by imprisonment or deportation.

language, played its part, although by 1926, fewer than half the indigenous population considered French to be their mother tongue.<sup>64</sup> For others, the realisation that the economic prosperity of the Moselle no longer lay with Germany but with France, and the close proximity of the 'German threat', leading to the construction of the Maginot Line in the 1930s, both persuaded them to accept a French future. Equally, it was felt the sooner links with the French interior were re-established and strengthened, the sooner links with Alsace would be severed. There was little interest in any form of political alliance with the Alsatian autonomist movement with its German connections and, from the very earliest stages of integration into France, politics in the Moselle were dominated by a pro-French, particularist party, the Union Républicaine Lorraine.<sup>65</sup>

In the interwar period French identity in the Moselle was based upon this curious mixture of loyalties and necessity. An existing sense of national identity felt by some Mosellans had to be adapted to accommodate changes which had affected the French nation since 1871. Others still had to learn what it was to be French. This process is summed up by the publication in 1919 of *La Fête du 14 Juillet* by Paul Charpenier, a teacher in Metz.<sup>66</sup> This explained to teachers and mayors alike how to celebrate Bastille Day, which had only been a national holiday in France since 1880. The period had also seen the Moselle's indigenous population define itself against the other racial groupings in the department: those originating from just across regional borders (Alsations, Luxembourgers, Saarlanders, and Lorrainers) and those from further afield (Germans en masse, French from the interior, Italians and eastern Europeans). As in the Basses-Alpes and French Flanders, degrees of foreignness developed and even varied within the racial groupings, for example, among Germans.<sup>67</sup> An uneasy, sketchy form of regional identity was forced upon the Moselle's population, a population which emerged from the experience 'méfiante' – unable to trust each other, let alone the foreigners in their midst. This layering of identities in the Moselle meant that the indigenous population could call upon national, regional or local identities. They could be French, Lorrainer, Mosellan or even *messin*, depending upon the pressures or circumstances of the day, but never German, and certainly not Alsatian. There is nothing unusual in this diversity of identity over a broad spectrum within a small, border region.<sup>68</sup> However, changes to the national frontier (and regional frontiers forty-seven years before) complicated the choices and confused an already traumatised population. Reconstruction following war-damage to the Moselle in the interwar period was largely limited to a few areas to the south of the department.<sup>69</sup> However, reconstruction of the

<sup>64</sup> *Annuaire Statistique Premier volume, 1919 à 1931*, 39.

<sup>65</sup> See Georges Livet and Guy Cabourdin, *Les élections dans le département de la Moselle*, Fascicule IV – 1919–1939, ADM, 63 J 6/2.

<sup>66</sup> ADM, 3 Tp 181. This file contains an advertisement for the book.

<sup>67</sup> Saarlanders were noticeably less foreign than Prussians, for example.

<sup>68</sup> See Smith, *National Identity*, 4.

<sup>69</sup> See Hugh Clout, 'Rural Revival: the recovery of the Moselle after World War I', *Modern and Contemporary France*, NS2, 4 (1994), 395–403.

population's morale and an ordering of its sense of identity had still not been properly achieved when the second German annexation began in 1940, this time under Nazi rule.

### **Conclusions**

It might easily be assumed that, by the second quarter of the twentieth century, national identity would have been the overwhelmingly dominant (if not sole) expression of collective identity in a country such as France. In fact, it appears that during the period following the First World War a variety of self-perceptions still existed in each of the three border regions examined above. Notwithstanding the differences between them, from the evidence presented several general conclusions can be advanced about identity formation in French border regions.

First, some form of regional or local consciousness was visible in each area considered. Already existent in the immediate postwar period, these regional sentiments were clearly both heightened and yet eventually degraded by the juxtaposing of opposing forces during the 1920s and 1930s. In the case of Flanders, and to a lesser degree the Basses-Alpes, regional sentiment was partially founded on obvious conceptions of shared ethnicity and the existence of a dialect in common with those just over the border. The expansion of international immigration and the arrival in each region of immigrants from further afield who were perceived as 'more foreign' than those from just across the border served to reinforce a sense of local, cross-border ethnic coherence and identity. Furthermore, regional identities were also being defined via opposition to the actions of central government, whenever government policy created the impression that local needs were not being fully serviced, or local achievements and sacrifices not fully recognised. This is most obvious in the case of the Moselle, whose inhabitants felt imposed upon and undervalued by the centre, a feeling rendered more acute by the actual presence in the region of a specific group of French from the interior. This resentment can also be seen through the attitudes towards economic interests intrinsic to the individual region – for example, tariff policy in Flanders or the enthusiasm for the abilities of German labour in the Moselle – which led to a heightened sense of regional self-awareness through conflicts with the centre.

Secondly, although regional identity remained significant, the interwar period was crucial in assuring the hegemony of national identity as the dominant self-perception in these border regions. Increased dependence upon the centre, as well as a heightened sense of the border contributed to the development of national identity. It is also clear, however, that the component of their identity which was 'national' or French was not simply imported from the centre into the border regions, but conditioned by local circumstances. Intervention and aid from the centre were needed both for the reconstruction of the former battlegrounds in the aftermath of the First World War and for the eventual preparations for the Second. In the Moselle this intervention took the obvious form of attempts to inculcate a perceived innate 'Frenchness' among the region's inhabitants. In Flanders the role of

the central administration in financing reconstruction was critical, while in the Basses-Alpes the construction of border fortifications during the 1930s similarly brought the issue of national solidarity sharply into focus. National identity also became strengthened through an increased awareness of the border. In spite of the familiarity of the 'other' living just across it, and of any sense of common regional identity, the inhabitants of border regions defined themselves in terms of the border and upon which side of it they lived. The reality of, and potential threats of, war, economic relations and the defence of what in each region was considered to be 'French' led those living in border regions to feel that they were particularly loyal, exemplary French citizens, who had made sacrifices for France. Their French national identity grew much more directly from their experience of the local border, and the desire to be protected behind it and recognised by others from within it, than it did from any ready-made version of French identity which had been brought to the region from the centre. The case of the Moselle in particular illustrates the limits to the extent to which identity can be 'imposed' from above, even when there is a general willingness to assimilate. This increase in national self-definition did not mean that regional sentiment necessarily abated – certainly it did not disappear – merely that the presence of the institutions of national government and the role of the border became ever more definite as the period progressed, while regional and national identities continued to coexist.

Thus both regional and national identities were developed in a context of 'degrees of foreignness' of several identifiable groups of 'others', rendered particularly clear by the proximity of these regions to the border. In terms of the mechanisms via which such shifts in identity and self-perception appear to be accomplished, changes in perceptions of identity are the result of complex external pressures and negative self-definitions. Even for the three regions considered here, the principal pressures acting on the evolution of identity included the land distribution resulting from the Treaty of Versailles, the instability of the international situation, the increasing intrusion of central government administration into regional life, the need for labour in the reconstruction period and the advent of mass immigration from all corners of the globe, as well as from just across the border. All these external forces influenced the adoption of identity far more than issues of national ethnic coherence, although the latter may have determined the fault lines along which the lines of perception were subsequently drawn. Because these variables differed in each region, the relative strengths of the identities adopted also varied, but it is readily apparent that even during the interwar period, French and foreign identities were not so much fixed poles as a sliding scale on which individuals clustered. The positioning of individuals along this scale was determined more by oppositions than affinities.