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Destitute Children in Alsace from the Beginning of the Twentieth Century to the End of the 1930s: Orphan Care in Strasbourg, in between France and Germany

Abstract: *In the twentieth century, Alsace featured as the most perfect example of a European border region, regardless of the national area it was associated with, France or Germany. It had to suffer from all the ensuing geopolitical effects, changing hands three times within a quarter of a century: in 1919, it came back to France after forty years during which it had belonged to Germany; in 1940, it was annexed by the National-Socialist Reich, before being handed back to France in 1944–5. The region thus lies at the meeting point between two powerful states and two distinct linguistic, cultural and legislative areas. Its very strong linguistic and cultural links with the German space seem to be at odds with the much more inclusive approach to nationality defended by the French, a contradiction summed up in the famous controversy involving French historian Fustel de Coulanges (1830–1889) and German historian Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903). According to Fustel de Coulanges, 'nationality is created neither by race nor by language. Alsace [should] be thought of […] according to its intimate involvement in the life of the French nation since the Revolution, which unquestionably has fostered a sense of being French', while Mommsen considered Alsatians as 'a German people who, out of natural necessity, should be united to the German homeland'.[1] This tension between two radically distinct conceptions of the nation underlay the 1871 annexation of Alsace by the German Empire and remained strong up to the interwar period. Smith, however, argues that 'Alsatian identity cannot be confined to a definite, narrow sense of belonging. […] The construction of their identity [provides] the example of an interweaving of attitudes ranging between demand, compromise, integration or rejection. This also leads to a challenge to the academic opposition between the French idea of the nation and the German conception of the people'.[2]*

Alsace can also be characterized by its religious pluralism. This fact, though it is not necessarily to be linked to its borderland location, remains essential and is relevant to our study. One specific element of Alsatian religious history is indeed connected to its borderland situation: the Concordat established in France in 1801 has been upheld in Alsace to this day, and has contributed to turning religion into

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1   The quotations are taken from Paul Smith, 'À la recherche d'une identité nationale en Alsace (1870–1918)', Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire, 50, 1 (1996), 23–35, 24.

2   Smith, 'À la recherche d'une identité nationale', 23.

a public, and therefore legal, political and social matter, which is of interest for our study. When France established secular education (1881) and put an end to the Concordat through the separation between church and state (1905), Alsace belonged to Germany and was therefore immune to these legislative changes. The attempt to extend these laws to it after its return to France in 1919 was a failure, mostly owing to Catholic mobilization. That is why, 'due to their changing national situation, Alsatians' most precise and intimate identity has for a long time been founded on Alsace's religious status'.[3] A deeper look at the religious composition of the region shows that Catholics remain the dominant group in the twentieth century, accounting for a little more than 70% of the population.[4] But Protestants, especially Lutherans, constitute a very influential group, the Jewish community is far from insignificant, and, in the second half of the twentieth century, the number of Muslims has steadily risen.

Within this general context, the specificities of Alsace are often underlined, even in academic papers, especially French. Yet the region is sometimes considered as a monad, as if floating on its own, cut off from the rest of the world. It is rarely studied as a borderland region, or compared to other borderland regions, hence the interest in choosing such an approach in this volume. Within this framework, our aim is to examine one specific group, destitute children, a group that is sometimes considered as marginal and yet allows several essential issues connected to the history of childhood to be considered: the attitude of adults and families towards children, the educational policies or the care programs set up by public authorities.

By 'destitute children', we mean children who lack the means of subsistence for economic reasons (they are often orphans) as well as for physical reasons (mentally handicapped children) or because they have moved to the margins of society, whether intentionally or not (delinquents, 'deviants' of all stripes). One obvious question could be to ask whether there is a specific way of caring for these children in Alsace, in a region where particular importance is granted to the family unit, wherein the child occupies a major part, due to the unstable nature of national identity.[5] In other words, is there a specifically 'borderland' reality of destitute childhood, and a specifically 'borderland' way of approaching it?

First, a significant part of Alsace's population is made up of children. Up to the 1930s, the birthrate was higher than in other French *départements,* even if it was a little lower or equal to that or Germany: in 1930, the rate was 19.4 per thousand

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3   Alfred Wahl and Jean-Claude Richez, La vie quotidienne en Alsace entre France et Allemagne 1850–1950 (Paris : Hachette, 1993), 11–2.

4   Wahl and Richez, Vie quotidienne, 122.

5   Wahl and Richez, Vie quotidienne, 13 and 95–169.

for the Bas-Rhin, and 18 per thousand for France as a whole.[6] The infant mortality rate was steadily decreasing, even if it remained for a long time higher among the Catholics than the Protestants, as Alfred Wahl has shown.[7] All the destitute children living in Alsace were not necessarily born in Alsace and are thus not all included in these figures, but it is still useful to take into account this significant 'supply' of infant populations. Furthermore, like the other regions but sometimes more so, Alsace was hit by the twentieth-century economic crises and conflicts such as the Great Depression or the Second World War[8], which provided their share of destitute children.

    Several students from the University of Strasbourg have recently focused on the subject and tackled it from three different perspectives, studying the way the region cared for mentally handicapped children,[9] for 'vulnerable', delinquent or destitute young girls,[10] and for orphans.[11] In each of these cases, the young researchers had to deal with various questions linked to Alsace's borderland status. The language used in the records, French or German, raised one immediate issue. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the German language prevailed, its dialect version still very much spoken up to the 1960s but hardly ever adopted in writing. German was thus used in written documents, up to the mid-twentieth century, even if there could be a mix of French and German during the French periods. The second issue has to do with the legislation that was applied in the periods under study: French, German, or sometimes even a combination of the two, at a time when there was a flurry of legislative measures regarding matters connected to childhood. Finally, the care policies and the educational methods differed, ranging from 'German' methods or 'French' methods to a combination

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6   Wahl and Richez, Vie quotidienne, 96.

7   For a summary, see Wahl and Richez, Vie quotidienne, 95–101.

8   For more details, especially on economic crises, see Bernard Vogler and Michel Hau, Histoire économique de l'Alsace: croissance, crises, innovations (Strasbourg : la Nuée bleue, 1997).

9   Valentine Hoffbeck, L'enfance arriérée au début du XXe siècle : entre assistance et exclusion. L'exemple de l'Institut St-André de Cernay (1891–1939), Master's degree thesis, under the supervision of Catherine Maurer, University of Strasbourg, 2008.

10 Elsa Rossler, Protéger l'enfant ou le punir ? Œuvre de charité, œuvre de défense sociale : la maison d'éducation pour jeunes filles catholiques du Neuhof (1853–1918), Master's degree thesis, under the supervision of Catherine Maurer, University of Strasbourg, 2008.

11 Gabrielle Ripplinger, L'orphelinat municipal du Neudorf (1907–1940). La question de la prise en charge municipale de l'enfance orpheline à Strasbourg dans la première moitié du XXe siècle, Master's degree thesis, under the supervision of Catherine Maurer, University of Strasbourg, 2015.

of the two. These three questions will be tackled here through the case study of the situation of orphans in Strasbourg from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of the 1930s.[12] The 1940 evacuation of the residents of the municipal orphanage of Strasbourg to Dordogne, their return only occurring after the end of the German occupation in a radically different political, economic and social context, represented a clear break with the preceding period and makes for an appropriate stopping point to our study.

'In the nineteenth century, Alsace, which was located at the crossroads between Swiss, French and German influences, was a real breeding ground for new ideas concerning education …,'[13] more particularly concerning the education of destitute children. In that respect, focusing on the municipal orphanage of Strasbourg inevitably leads the researcher to a number of major questions. What role did Alsace's geopolitical situation play in establishing a legislative framework for dealing with destitute, orphaned children in the region and what was its concrete effects on the orphanage's day-to-day management? What was the respective part of French and German influences in the design – particularly, the architecture – of the place and in its day-to-day functioning? Finally, did the residents and staff take a particular approach to the issue of nationality, given their borderland situation?

The general administrative and legislative context

In the twentieth century, the municipal orphanage of Strasbourg was part of a wide range of welfare policies. Indeed, Strasbourg had developed early on an intense concern for its most destitute populations. Strasbourg had become a free city in the Middle Ages and enjoyed a rather large autonomy. It defined its own jurisdiction, police rules and managed its own charitable institutions. Consequently, 'a solid institutional framework as far as charitable matters are concerned is one of the hallmarks – it has remained so under France's control – of a threefold system,'[14] comprising the Hôpital des Bourgeois, the chaplaincy Saint Marc and the Maison des Orphelins (the 'House of the Orphans'), the ancestor of the institution here under study. A special type of

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12 This study is heavily based on Gabrielle Ripplinger's Master's degree thesis.
13 Jean-Rémy Butterlin, 'L'éducation correctionnelle dans le Bas-Rhin au XIXème et au début du XXème siècle : un foisonnement d'institutions', in Conservatoire national des archives de l'histoire de l'éducation spécialisée, ed., Contribution à l'histoire des grands courants confessionnels et laïques en Alsace dans le travail éducatif et social du Moyen Âge au XXe siècle (Strasbourg: Cat l'essor, 2003), 23–38, 23.
14 Elisabeth Sablayrolles, L'enfance abandonnée à Strasbourg au XVIIIe siècle et la fondation de la Maison des enfants-trouvés (Strasbourg: Istra, 1976), 4.

assistance reserved for orphans had been organized rather early on: the Hospice des Orphelins (the 'Orphans' Hospital') had probably existed since the early fourteenth century, having probably been founded shortly after the great plague of 1315–6.[15] When Strasbourg came under French control, in 1681:

> to each age class, to each type of hidden or displayed indigence, almost to each disease corresponded specific charitable institutions which mostly dated from three centuries before and which owed their particular shape to the Reformation which had allowed them to gain possession of the secularized goods of monasteries and had accelerated the transition to a secular form of administration.[16]

After coming under French control, the city carried on the same tradition: with the rise of natalism, abandoned children and orphans were conceived of as future French citizens that had to be protected, mainly from disease and perversion. It was almost certainly at that time that there occurred a shift in the definition of assistance from a type of assistance based on charity to one based on specialized social institutions. On 14 September 1748 a charitable institution specifically intended to educate, welcome and instruct abandoned children was created in Strasbourg, as a way to respond to the increase of '*expositions*', i.e. abandoned children, and to reform the ways of dealing with them.

French legislation regarding the protection of childhood slowly became more specific. The revolutionary law of 28 June 1793 stated that 'the nation henceforward shall take care of the physical and moral education of the children known as abandoned children, who will henceforth indistinctly be called orphans'.[17] But a genuine state-defined system of public assistance was only set up under the Third Republic. At that time, Strasbourg belonged to Germany and was no longer concerned by French legislation. Certain children, indeed, would be cared for by the city itself all along the twentieth century, rather than by the département or the State: these 'municipal orphans' were not transfered to host families or private or public non-municipal institutions, as was the case for the children under the care of the Assistance Publique,[18] but to the orphanage of the city. The distinction between 'municipal orphans' and the others (the figures vary but the municipal orphanage welcomed a hundred children each year between 1930 and

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15 Ripplinger, L'orphelinat municipal du Neudorf, 23.

16 Sablayrolles, L'enfance abandonnée à Strasbourg, 6.

17 Law adopted on 28 juin 1793 by the Convention, defining the bases of childhood protection by the State: see the list of legal texts in www.oned.gouv.fr/…/liste-textes-legaux-dans-leur-version-dorigine- (last visited on 18 July 2015).

18 On the Assistance Publique, see Ivan Jablonka, Ni père, ni mère. Histoire des enfants de l'assistance publique (1874–1939) (Paris: Seuil, 2006).

1935)[19] was based on geographical data (the parents had to be from Strasbourg or to have resided there for a long time) but also on less concrete data, based on notions of honor and dignity. The orphanage indeed only accepted children whose parents were considered as decent and respectable, as is shown in an extract of the Administrative Record of the City of Strasbourg for the years 1935–1939. The extract indicates that

> the Office[20] will take care of the orphans that cannot be cared for by their family after the death of their parents, and will take all due measures to have them admitted either as municipal orphans if they meet **the required conditions of residence and dignity,** or as children placed under the supervision of the *département*-based service of the Assistance Publique.[21]

German legislative and administrative practises certainly played a role in the preservation of this system as, generally speaking, they reintroduced in Alsace 'an ancient tradition of self-government by the cities dating from before 1789'[22] and favoured a local approach over appeal to the *département* or the nation, even after Alsace came back to France in 1919.

These specific public welfare policies were allied in Strasbourg to particularly dynamic private charitable organizations, in particular those specializing in child care. Their dynamism was also related to the very specific religious situation of Strasbourg and Alsace, partly derived, as we have seen, from its borderland location. The Catholic congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg, who worked at the municipal orphanage, also managed other institutions designed to 'shelter abandoned children, exclusively or for a good part',[23] in particular Sainte-Barbe, a small institution for girls located in Schiltigheim, and the orphanage Saint-Charles, well appreciated by the Superior General of the Congregation, who declared: 'I have only one wish concerning Saint-Charles, that … the moral and Christian education of children should always be its first and foremost aim'.[24] Protestant institutions were also founded, such as the orphanage of Neuhof,

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19 Ripplinger, L'orphelinat municipal du Neudorf (1907–1940), 63.

20 The Office municipal d'assistance et de prévoyance sociale (OMAPS): see further.

21 Administrative record of the City of Strasbourg, 1935–1945, vol.II (Strasbourg: Istra, 1948), 109–10. The passage in bold type has been underlined by Gabrielle Ripplinger.

22 Bernard Vogler, Histoire politique de l'Alsace: de la Révolution à nos jours (Strasbourg: Istra, 1995), 207.

23 Marie-Alfred (mère) Renaut, La congrégation des Sœurs de la Charité de Strasbourg. Petit aperçu historique (Strasbourg: Maison Mère de la Toussaint, 1945), 155.

24 Renaut, La congrégation des Sœurs de la Charité, 158.

created in 1825,[25] shortly after the creation in 1822 of the orphanage of Beuggen, in Baden, or that of Düsselthal, in Rhineland.

Concerning the interwar period, the short booklets written by Auguste Hermann provide a good survey of the services and institutions the city of Strasbourg had set up to care for children in difficult situations.[26] They present first the institutions supervised by the city through the Office municipal d'assistance et de prévoyance sociale (OMAPS). The OMAPS oversaw all 'social actions initiated by the municipal Administration'.[27] It acted as an intermediate body and managed directly a few municipal institutions, such as the Hospice des orphelins or the Children's municipal Asylum.[28] It was also in charge of child and youth protection: 'in matters relating to guardianship, the Office carries out the functions of the Conseil communal des orphelins, according to local prescriptions' and remains 'the organ responsible for implementing the decisions of dependency courts, especially in matters relating to education and the management of the wards' fortune'.[29] As such, the Office worked alongside the services of the Assistance Publique, which were introduced as soon as Strasbourg came back to France and functioned at the level of the *département.* At the beginning of the 1920s, they tried to take control over the municipal orphanage, but their efforts remained fruitless despite the fragile financial state of the orphanage.[30] The mayor of Strasbourg, Jacques Peirotes, thus declared in 1921 that supervision by the *département*

> …would raise in Strasbourg a legitimate outcry. The orphanage is, indeed, considered by a great part of the population and especially by its ancient wards as an inherent part of the City itself, and it is clear that the reasons that are put forward today are not enough to justify that the City should give up an institution that has so admirably functioned for so many years.[31]

25 Georges Foessel, Le Neuhof, établissement protestant pour enfants, 150ème anniversaire (Strasbourg: 1975), 17.

26 Auguste Herrmann, Strasbourg social (Strasbourg: Istra, 1935), and Herrmann, Les sociétés strasbourgeoises de service social (Strasbourg: Istra, 1938).

27 Herrmann, Strasbourg social, 22.

28 Herrmann, Les sociétés strasbourgeoises, 31–2. The Asile municipal d'enfants was an annex to the Hospice des Orphelins and was designed to shelter abandoned children.

29 Herrmann, Les sociétés strasbourgeoises, 13.

30 Ripplinger, L'orphelinat municipal du Neudorf (1907–1940), 51–3.

31 From the speech preserved in the archives of the city of Strasbourg and quoted by Ripplinger, L'orphelinat municipal du Neudorf (1907–1940), 52.

This twofold system, whereby orphans were cared for by the city and by the *département* at the same time, lasted in Strasbourg throughout the interwar years and even after.

Auguste Herrmann also describes the 'private Catholic charitable works of the Diocese of Strasbourg',[32] mainly composed of denominational orphanages such as Saint-Charles, Sainte-Richarde in Andlau, the orphanages of Guebwiller, Thann, Mulhouse-Dornach, Willerhof and Neuf-Brisach (for boys) or those of Saverne, Hilsenheim, Ebermünster, Niederbronn, Mulhouse, Saint-Joseph (Strasbourg) and Steinkreuz (Colmar) (for girls). Finally, he mentions the Protestant and Israelite institutions, such as the Patronage committee for the assisted children of Strasbourg and the country or the Israelite girls' orphanage of Strasbourg.[33]

The municipal orphanage was thus part of the fabric of 'an ancient city [which] has always led the way of social action [and which] has remained imbued with the idea that there are some principles of social justice that must be shared'.[34] This 'ancient city', however, was also shaped by the influence of several religious denominations and by French and German interventions in its administrative and legislative framework. This climate of emulation, rather unique in Europe, is likely to have had positive effects on the diversity of actions undertaken to deal with orphans, thus turning the borderland city into a testing ground for social action. Can the same be said regarding the design of the place, more particularly its architectural design?

Architectural design and borderland situation

In 1904, a fire destroyed the orphanage, then located in the ancient monastery Sainte-Madeleine, in the centre of the city. Total reconstruction proved necessary, but the huge reconstruction works also provided an opportunity to create a radically new building. The new orphanage was to be built in 'a neighborhood of Neudorf filled with light and fresh air, far from the cramped atmosphere of the centre'.[35] The new design had been selected after an architectural competition had been organized in the whole *Reich* and won by Ernst Vetterlein.[36] The building, whose

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32 Herrmann, Les sociétés strasbourgeoises, 103–12.

33 Herrmann, Les sociétés strasbourgeoises, 133–5, 144 and 156–7.

34 Herrmann, Strasbourg social, foreword.

35 Association des anciens élèves du foyer de la jeunesse Charles Frey, 130ème anniversaire ! (Strasbourg: Editions du Meiselocker, 2007), 13.

36 Ernst Vetterlein was born in Leipzig in 1873. He studied architecture in Dresden, Munich and in Aachen, at the *Technische Hochschule*. At about the same time he won the competition for best design for the orphanage of Strasbourg, his designs for the

construction started in 1907 and ended in 1909, conveyed an evident desire for modernity, particularly in the design of the main structure, which favoured good ventilation, circulation, openness and greenery. 12,000 m² were given over to the main 130-m-long and 16-m-wide building, which was divided into a central body and two small annexes, with a wing and a stairway reserved to each sex, and with a large yard next to it. With its large bay windows, its southward orientation and its vast verandas, the new orphanage perfectly exemplified new public health concerns.

Illustration 2: A plan of the municipal orphanage, viewed from the front, in 1909 (AVCUS, 845 W 162, plans of the Hospice des Orphelins, c.1910).[37]
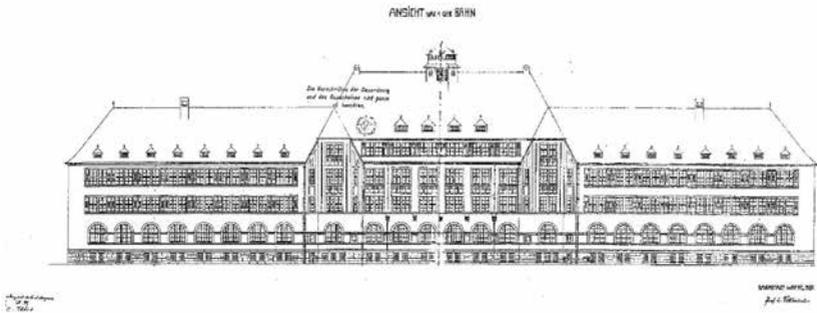

New knowledge, derived from the discovery of the part bacteria played in the spread of disease, disseminated throughout Europe and especially in Germany, attempting to solve such issues as overcrowding in urban spaces, waste disposal or water pollution.[38] These ideas, developing in medical circles, also influenced social policies, urbanism or architecture. It can be noticed that the architectural language favoured

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Business School of Cologne and the municipal theatre of Hagen were also selected; these buildings are still visible today. He was appointed *Professor für Städtebau, Siedlungswesen und Kleinwohnungsbau* at the Hanover *Technische Hochschule* in 1919. He was a member of the *Bund Deutscher Architekten* and the author of several books about architecture. He died in Hanover in 1950.

37 Archives of the city and the urban community of Strasbourg (AVCUS), 845 W 162, plans of the Hospice des Orphelins, c.1910.

38 Good surveys about the question include Jean-Pierre Goubert, Une histoire de l'hygiène: eau et salubrité dans la France contemporaine (Paris: Fayard/Pluriel, 2011); Calixte Hudemann-Simon, La conquête de la santé en Europe, 1750–1900 (Paris: Belin, 1999) and Georges Vigarello, Histoire des pratiques de santé: le sain et le malsain depuis le Moyen Âge (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999).

by Vetterlein was used for other types of healthcare buildings: the sanatoriums, which sprang from the same conceptions of public health (ill people were to be treated through exposure to sun, light and air), were equiped with verandas similar to those the orphanage boasted at the time of its inauguration in 1910.[39]

Illustration 3: The veranda of a sanatorium and a back view of the municipal orphanage and of its veranda. (Personal collection of Christian Pfeiffer, 1950).[40]
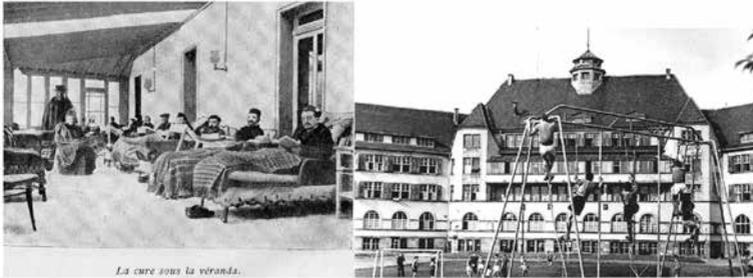
Even when it came to interior furnishings, the building proved very innovative. The orphanage was one of the first buildings in the city that could boast equiped bathrooms.

Illustration 4: The bathrooms of the orphanage (Personal collection of Christian Pfeiffer, 1950).[41]

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39 About sanatoriums, see Philippe Grandvoinnet, Architecture thérapeutique – Histoire des sanatoriums en France (1900–1945) (Paris: Métis Presses, 2014).

40 Left, ancient postcard of the sanatorium of Vernet-les-Bains (Pyrénées-Orientales); right, the courtyard of the municipal orphanage (the photograph is from the personal collection of Christian Pfeiffer, the ancient president of the Association des anciens élèves du foyer Charles Frey), c. 1950.

41 Photographs from the personal collection of Christian Pfeiffer, c. 1950.

How can this very modern building be connected to Alsace's peculiar geopolitical situation?

From the beginning of the German annexation and onward, authorities had emphasized 'their significant amount of investments in order to show Alsatians what an enviable situation was allotted to them as citizens of the German Empire',[42] a much better situation than they would have had under French control. The same concern was visible in other border regions or in regions where German presence had to compete with another area of cultural and linguistic influence. Such was the case in Posen (modern-day Poznan) for example, in the Prussian province of Posnania, where Wilhelm II used Joseph Stübben's designs to stamp his mark on the city in a bid against Polish influence.[43] Strasbourg itself inspired ambitious urbanistic programs, along with a 'flurry of architectural activity aiming at Germanizing the urban landscape'.[44] The same policy was carried on by the successive city authorities, more particularly by Rudolf Schwander, who became mayor in 1906 – the time when the orphanage was built, with total funding from the city. In a society that was becoming increasingly medicalized, there was also the desire to modernize healthcare locations and 'municipal investment was nowhere as important as in Alsace-Lorraine… In Strasbourg, the city itself funded the construction of many new services that opened between 1906 and 1914.'[45] In a period of economic prosperity, the capital of the *Reichsland* thus found the financial means that were necessary to make sure orphans benefited from the city's policy of urban regeneration but also from the improved healthcare programs.

Though such intervention was particularly intense in Strasbourg, it was also visible elsewhere in the *Reichsland*. In Mulhouse and Colmar monumental orphanages thus appeared, striving to comply with the new health principles. The orphanage Saint-Joseph in Mulhouse was admittedly located in an ancient castle, but at the beginning of the twentieth century an entirely new building was adjoined to it, which sheltered near to 170 orphans in May 1911.

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42   Vogler, Histoire culturelle de l'Alsace, 354.

43   Kaiserschloss Posen – Zamek cesarski w Poznaniu. Von der 'Zwingburg im Osten' zum Kulturzentrum 'Zamek' – Od pruskiej 'warowni na wschodzie' do Centrum Kultury 'Zamek', Catalogue d'exposition (Potsdam – Poznań, Stiftung Preußische Schlößer und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg – Centrum Kultury Zamek w Poznaniu, 2003).

44   Bernard Vogler, Histoire culturelle de l'Alsace du Moyen Âge à nos jours: les très riches heures d'une région frontière (Strasbourg : La Nuée Bleue, 1996), 354.

45   Olivier Faure, 'Municipalité et hôpitaux dans les villes françaises au XIXème siècle', in Jacques-Guy Petit and Yannick Marec, eds., Le social dans la ville en France et en Europe (1750–1914) (Paris: Editions de l'Atelier, 1997), 63–74, 71.

Illustration 5: *The orphanage Saint-Joseph in Mulhouse. (Personal collection of Christian Pfeiffer, 1950).*

Great attention was paid to the sunlight, the height and ventilation of the building, its openness to the outside and its southward orientation.[46] The orphanage of Colmar was built in 1907 by Edouard Spittler, an architect who was mainly famous for his school designs. The imposing building, which was inaugurated on 4 July 1910, was also attentive to the new health concerns, even if its style, which can be linked to the regionalist school, was different from that of the Strasbourg orphanage.[47]

Illustration 6: *The ancient orphanage of Colmar. (Personal collection of Christian Pfeiffer, 1950).*

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46 Orphanage Saint-Joseph, Mulhouse-Dornach, 1920. It has become the Maison d'Enfants à Caractère Social, and was acquired in 1899 by the sisters of the congregation of the Very Saint Saviour of Niederbronn.

47 The orphanage has been converted into housing estates by the Office Public d'Aménagement et de Construction.

After Alsace came back to France in 1919, health imperatives were not forgotten, as can be seen in the case of the municipal orphanage of Strasbourg: 'during the year 1934, in order to complete the action of the Hospice des Orphelins, the administrative commission of the Hospices Civils ('Civil Hospitals') acquired a house in Saverne, near the forest…which was used as a holiday house for the residents of the Hospice'.[48] Before that, the children were sent to different private homes, depending on the available room, but with the 1934 acquisition, they were all able to have a little holiday to 'regenerate and repair themselves by breathing the pure air of the Vosges'.[49] Though in other parts of France children were also sent to the country, the mountain or the sea, such a practise can be related to the German *Ferienverschickung* and to Germans' love of the 'great outdoors'. Without more detailed studies, it is impossible to know whether the purchase of the house in Saverne sprang from a French or a German-Alsatian initiative, or if the decision owed everything to circumstances. One may yet notice that at the time the acquisition was made, the administrative commission of the Hospices civils enjoyed only limited financial means: buying the house must then have been considered as an imperative, whatever the cost. Breathing pure mountain air was certainly one of the few remedies that were then offered against tuberculosis, which wrought havoc in Europe, in borderland regions as much as elsewhere.

After studying the architectural design of the orphanage, it may be interesting to focus now on its day-to-day management, and the way it was affected by the succession of German and French influences.

Day-to-day management and national influences on the borderland

As we have seen, the orphanage had been managed by the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg, a congregation founded in 1734, since the eighteenth century, when Strasbourg belonged to France. The sisters did the laundry and the cooking, provided medicine and nursing care. They also had to try to make the institution self-sufficient. Finally, they were in charge of instructing the residents in academic or religious knowledge, even if there were both Protestant and Catholic children: between 1904 and 1933, out of 216 resident girls, 120 were Catholic and 96 were 'Evangelical', that is to say Protestant.[50]

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48   Herrmann, Les sociétés strasbourgeoises, 31–2.

49   Herrmann, Les sociétés strasbourgeoises, 31–2.

50   The graphs are based on the lists of the children admitted to the municipal orphanage of Strasbourg between 1904 and 1933 (AVCUS, 1260W49 and 1260W50).

*Figure 1: Religion of girls admitted in the orphanage between 1904 and 1933 (AVCUS,
   1260W49 and 1260W50).[51]*

Religion of the girls admitted between 1904 and 1933

44%

56%

■ Catholic
□ Evangelical
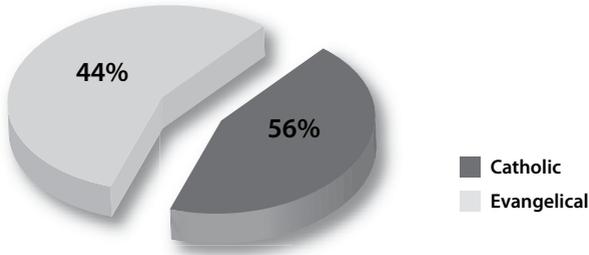
During the same period, out of 234 boys, 142 were declared Catholic and 92 Evangelical.

*Figure 2: Religion of boys admitted in the orphanage between 1904 and 1933 (AVCUS,
          1260W49 and 1260W50).[52]*

Religion of the boys admitted between 1904 and 1933

41%

59%

■ Catholic
□ Evangelical
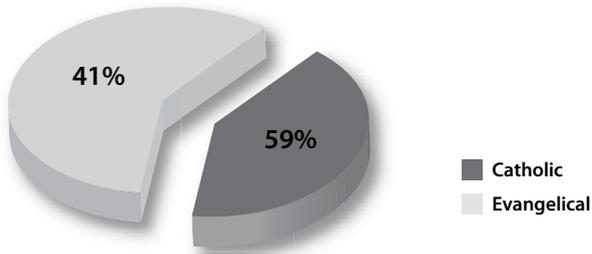
In a city in which two different faiths had coexisted since it had come back to France in 1681, the sisters were not always unanimously accepted. In the nineteenth century, they were for the first time pushed aside before being called back

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51 The graphs are based on the lists of the children admitted to the municipal orphanage
    of Strasbourg between 1904 and 1933 (AVCUS, 1260W49 and 1260W50).

52 The graphs are based on the lists of the children admitted to the municipal orphanage
    of Strasbourg between 1904 and 1933 (AVCUS, 1260W49 and 1260W50).

in 1848.[53] After the German annexation, their position was never challenged, even when the *Kulturkampf* policy raised tensions.[54] The rules of behaviour set up for the children in 1910 testify to the importance of religion in the institution. Prayers 'recited out loud by a pupil of each faith' came before each meal, the pupils could go for a walk only 'after vespers or the evening prayer' and their schedule was organized around religious practise since 'all the pupils have the duty to attend the divine offices of their respective cult on Sundays and on festivals'.[55] Religious instruction was also granted an essential place, since the teaching occurred every day after dinner, right before the divine office every pupil had to attend. The books that were read and directly available to the pupils were 'devotion and instruction books designed for the schools', while reading any other book 'shall not be allowed without the special and express authorization of the Director, who will guide [the children] in the choice of recreational reading'.[56] Concerning the period of the early 1920s still, after the return to France, a list of the prayers to be recited during the day (one in the morning, one 'before eating', one 'after eating' and one in the evening) has been found in the archives.[57]

In October 1926, however, the Municipal Council decided to replace 'all the sisters of the orphanage with laypersons'.[58] A few weeks after this decision, Laurent Meyer, the then adjunct to the socialist mayor Jacques Peirotes, delivered a speech providing us with some explanations. First, he deemed it inadmissible that the children, who were attending an interfaith school, should 'within the [orphanage] receive a separate education depending on their faith'.[59] He also remarked that 'the

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53 Sophie Ehret, Entre rupture et entente avec la ville : la congrégation des Sœurs de la Charité de Strasbourg de 1914 à 1945, Master's degree thesis, under the supervision of Catherine Maurer, University of Strasbourg, 2003.

54 The *Kulturkampf* policy was led in Prussia and in the German Reich from 1871 to the late 1870s. Bismark's government undertook to fight against the influence of churches, especially the Catholic Church, on society through legislative means. Congregations were particularly targeted but those that participated in social care institutions, like the Sisters of Charity of Strasbourg, were spared.

55 AVCUS, 1720W56, Copy of the rules of behaviour for the pupils of the orphanage, 1910.

56 AVCUS, 1720W56, Copy of the rules of behaviour for the pupils of the orphanage, 1910.

57 AVCUS, 1720W11, List of the prayers for the children, c. 1920.

58 AVCUS, 71MW205, Extract from the minutes of the meeting of the commission des hospices civils held on 11 Oct. 1926.

59 AVCUS, 71 MW 205, Report of the Municipal Council. Communication from the administration (9 Nov. 1926). Speech of Laurent Meyer, adjunct to the socialist mayor,

sisters were appointed by the Monastery without previous examination of their <u>special</u> aptitude by the Direction of the Orphanage or by the Administration',[60] even as they were trained in the care of the sick much more than in the education of children. These arguments had probably already partly been laid by a report destined to the administrative commission of the hospices civils that the orphanage depended on, which pointed out that 'a person in sufficient command of the French language' was needed and that 'the education of the young girls of the orphanage who have left school leaves much to be desired'. The report suggested replacing the Sisters of Charity with trained staff, 'with solid scientific, educational and domestic knowledge'.[61]

The goal was thus to lead the previous evolutions to their logical outcome: an entirely secular management: 'the secularization of the institution [is] […] the natural consequence of the interfaith evolution of schools'. The point was not to 'thwart the religious needs of the orphans'[62] but total secularization would help fill in certain gaps, lead to a more 'homogeneous' management and put the staff more directly under control of the administration. These were rather classical arguments, a staple of the socialist rhetoric used by Meyer or Peirotes, in the line of that used by the Republicans under the Third Republic.[63] They were nevertheless rather original in the newly French Alsace, and they raised fierce oppositions, at a time when Alsatian Catholics, supported by many of their peers throughout France, had just prevailed over Edouard Herriot's government's decision to put an end to the Concordat, which had survived during the German annexation.[64]

There is nothing to surprise us in such an opposition from the congregation[65], but the reactions of ancient residents are particularly telling. On 5 October, several

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in response to M. Trebus, radical-socialist, about the dismissal of the catholic sisters attached to the orphanage.

60　AVCUS, 71 MW 205.

61　Letter of the delegate of the orphanage to the administrative commission of the hospices civils (1st Sept. 1926), quoted in Ehret, Entre rupture et entente avec la ville, 100.

62　AVCUS, 71 MW 205.

63　See Catherine Maurer, La ville charitable. Les œuvres sociales catholiques en France et en Allemagne (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2012), 286–90.

64　For more detail, see Vogler, Histoire politique de l'Alsace, 229–30.

65　The Superior of the Congregation, Father Lutz, said he was 'sadly surprised by such a brutal measure which nothing seems to justify in his opinion', letter dated 4 Oct. 1926, to the president of the administrative commission of the hospices civils, quoted in Ehret, Entre rupture et entente avec la ville, 101.

former boarders wrote to the mayor to express their 'intense emotion'. They insisted on the 'deep gratefulness and the intense sympathy' they felt for the sisters who had been managing the orphanage for more than a century: 'The administration, as well as the Director, the author of this project, should know about the devotion, the abnegation of the good sisters and the popularity they enjoy among the population of Strasbourg'. They asked for the preservation 'in this ancient institution of Strasbourg of the high morality of the Sisters which has constituted the mainstay of this house for generations'.[66] A little later, a woman named Lucie Biedermann wrote on behalf of the orphaned girls to draw attention to the 'most tender care' they had received from the Sisters whose 'love' and 'maternal goodness' cannot be questioned, and who 'infuse into young souls [a] reflection of [their] truly charitable heart'.[67] The orphans, 'who have no support whatsoever in the world', are resenting the dismissal of their 'Consoling Angel[s], [their] darling mother[s] who took [them] under [their] protection', which 'bereaves them for a second time'.[68] The Catholic press also stood by the sisters and described their dismissal as a 'shame on Strasbourg'[69] or as an example of 'the hate-based policy devised by the Municipal Council'.[70]

The decision of the Municipal Council was nevertheless not overturned, and the sisters had to leave the orphanage, whereas in other French cities, they kept their position in civil social institutions. The episode shows that though the evolution of the management of the orphanage was certainly linked to national influences, in this specific case, it had much more to do with Meyer's and Peirotes's ideological orientation, added to issues related to qualifications and individual personalities, than with Strasbourg's specific borderland situation. Did this situation, though, have any influence on the way issues related to the nation were apprehended inside the orphanage?

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66 AVCUS, 71 MW 205, letter from the ancient pupils of the hospice des orphelins de Strasbourg Neudorf to the Mayor of Strasbourg, M. Peirotes, 5 Oct. 1926.

67 Letter from Lucie Biedermann (5 Nov. 1926), to the Mother Superior of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity, archives of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity, quoted in Ehret, Entre rupture et entente avec la ville, 182.

68 Letter from Lucie Biedermann.

69 AVCUS, 71 MW 205, title of an article published on 12 Oct. 1926 in *Der Elsässer*.

70 AVCUS, 71 MW 205, title of an article published on 30 Oct. 1926 in *Der Elsässer*.

Borderland situation and national issues inside the orphanage

The change from belonging to one nation to another was first translated in Alsace by a change in languages, at least from an official point of view. The succession of official languages is visible in the records left by the orphanage after the First World War, more particularly in the enrollment records. They brutally switched from German to French in 1919 and, out of 104 young girls enrolled between 1919 and 1933, only two had German-sounding names (Frida and Augusta) whereas until 1918 the girls' first names were usually equally divided between 'French' and 'German' names. There was thus a clear desire to adapt the language to the new status of Alsace, even if bilingualism remained a reality, as can be seen in the records of the interwar period.[71]

In an institution in which day-to-day management mattered necessarily more than more abstract considerations, it is difficult to find testimonies or documents dealing with the sense of national belonging. Mention can be made of a passage taken from a magazine published by the city of Strasbourg during the First World War, presenting the orphanage.[72] It is said that despite the requisition of the place by the army, the children, who were transfered to a building that was too small for them in the north of Strasbourg, 'have enough clothes and shoes', are surrounded by 'people […] [who] do their best [to] subtitute themselves to the love of a mother or a father' and 'are much better than a thousand other children who are not orphans'.[73] The propaganda is obvious but patriotic feelings seem to have indeed been shared in the orphanage: 'The war threat […] first gave rise among the apprentices to feelings of national enthusiasm, expressed through word and song, which were all the more admirable as they arose spontaneously and were not dictated by any superior exigencies'.[74] This shows that the young boys of the orphanage seem to have taken the side of Germany without being particularly aware of their borderland situation.

Things were different in the interwar period, especially at the end of the 1930s. In a radio speech delivered on 26 December 1937 to the children of the orphanage, the director Henri Will staged a dialogue between himself and the child Jesus, come back among men on Christmas day. To the director's complaint about the expensive cost of living, the child Jesus replied:

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71 Ripplinger, L'orphelinat municipal du Neudorf, 161–2.
72 AVCUS, 71 MW 82, Henri Will, 'Das städtische Waisenhaus während der Kriegszeit', Blätter für das Strassburger Armenwesen, c. 1915, 213–5, translated from the German.
73 AVCUS, 71 MW 82.
74 AVCUS, 71 MW 82.

> Have you never thought about the place where you would be celebrating Christmas if the war had broken out? You do well know that you would never have been able to remain in your beautiful orphanage… and that you would have had to leave with your 300 children and travel on the roads and on the train…meeting cannons, trucks, tanks and war machines on the way![75]

These words foreshadow the planned evacuation of the orphanage in September 1938, when the Nazi claims on Czechoslovakia precipitated an international crisis that was only temporarily defused by the Munich Agreement. There was then great alarm among the former residents of the orphanage, as certain letters show. 'We hear once again the same serenade and this time, it seems worse than before. There are serious talks of war. Is the worst to be feared in Alsace too?'[76] ; another one asks: 'Will Strasbourg be evacuated? What shall happen to the children who are so many?'[77] Another one mentions 'the days of sadness and anguish when our youth was being threatened with destruction', which was avoided thanks to 'great men' such as 'Daladier'[78]. Poems in Alsatian, disseminated in *L'ami des Orphelins,* also convey a certain form of patriotism, especially centered on the *Heimat,* the 'little homeland'.[79]

Even though the small number of sources should invite us to remain cautious, it seems that during the 1930s Alsatians became much more aware of their borderland situation and that they transferred their patriotic feelings away from the nation onto the Alsatian 'little homeland', announcing evolutions that would be more visible from the end of the 1960s onward. An indirect confirmation of this is provided by the fact that, during the same period, the orphanage of Strasbourg established links with the orphanage of Lille, which also depended on the city's Hospices Civils. Meetings were organized; for instance, orphans from Lille visited Strasbourg at the end of August 1935. The children were 'delighted' by such exchanges, by the 'lovely welcome' and the

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75 Henri Will, 'Ansprache des Waisenhausdirektors für Weihnachten im Waisenhaus', *L'ami des orphelins*, 1938, 1. *L'ami des orphelins* is a magazine published by the municipal orphanage of Strasbourg from 1936 on.

76 Letter dated 23 Sept. 1938, *L'ami des orphelins*, 1938, 4.

77 Letter dated 26 Sept. 1938, *L'ami des orphelins*, 1938, 4.

78 Letter dated 3 Oct. 1938, *L'ami des orphelins*, 1938, 4. Edouard Daladier was Président du Conseil (the leader of the government) between 1938 and 1940 and as such signed the Munich Agreement.

79 *L'ami des orphelins*, 1938, 2.

'gracious and friendly hospitality'[80] they enjoyed in the Alsatian capital. These are the only recorded relationships between the orphanage of Strasbourg and another such institution and, perhaps significantly, it was also a borderland place, although it probably did not have to face such issues concerning national identity as the Strasbourg orphanage.

We thus think that looking into the way orphans were cared for in Strasbourg in between the German annexation at the beginning of the twentieth century and the return to France during the interwar period makes it possible to study issues closely related to the subjects of the borderland and the sense of national belonging. First, we have had to tackle the leglislative and administrative frame-work, and the effects geopolitical changes had on it: the Hospice des Orphelins, as it was still called in the 1930s, was the heir of a long history, starting in a Germanic context in the Middle Ages, extending throughout the first French period, in between 1681 and 1870, and the German period between 1871 and 1918, and finally undergoing two different transitions from Germany to France and France to Germany in the twentieth century, if we take 1940 as a stopping point for our presentation. It was possible for the institution to remain in the same space, the borderland, and to pursue the same field of activity, child care, although both space and activity were very strongly affected, in the region and at the time, by important changes. A closer look at the legislative and administrative under-pinnings of the orphanage brings to mind Tancrède Falconeri's famous phrase, in Giuseppe Lampedusa's *The Leopard,* 'everything must change so that everything can stay the same', and would seem to make of it an 'Alsatian' exception. A study of its architectural design would rather seem to qualify such a view: new health concerns and new priorities penetrated the institution and Germany's dynamic action in that field could seem to contrast with French traditions. Child care institutions were also affected by architectural modernization, in the borderland maybe more than elsewhere, fueled by Germany's desire to compete with its near neighbour. In the absence of more systematic studies on the architecture of child care institutions, we should nevertheless remain cautious. As for the day-to-day management of the orphanage, it was far from free of political and ideological considerations, but these were only partly linked to the borderland situation. Fi-nally, in the 1930s at least, in a period of intense international tensions, awareness of their borderland status clearly rose among the managers and the boarders, but it seems to have strengthened a sense of belonging to the Alsatian 'little homeland'

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80   AVCUS, 1720 W 33, Correspondance between the hospice des orphelins de Strasbourg and Lille orphanage, between 14 Sept. 1933 and 22 July 1935.

rather than to the 'great nation' of France. The approaches could be numerous and would undoubtedly need further study but we think that these outlines for a microhistory of subjects that have for a long time been neglected, particularly in Alsace, that is to say childhood and borderland areas, could provide useful elements for larger historiographical perspectives on such questions as conflicts and nationalisms in the twentieth century.
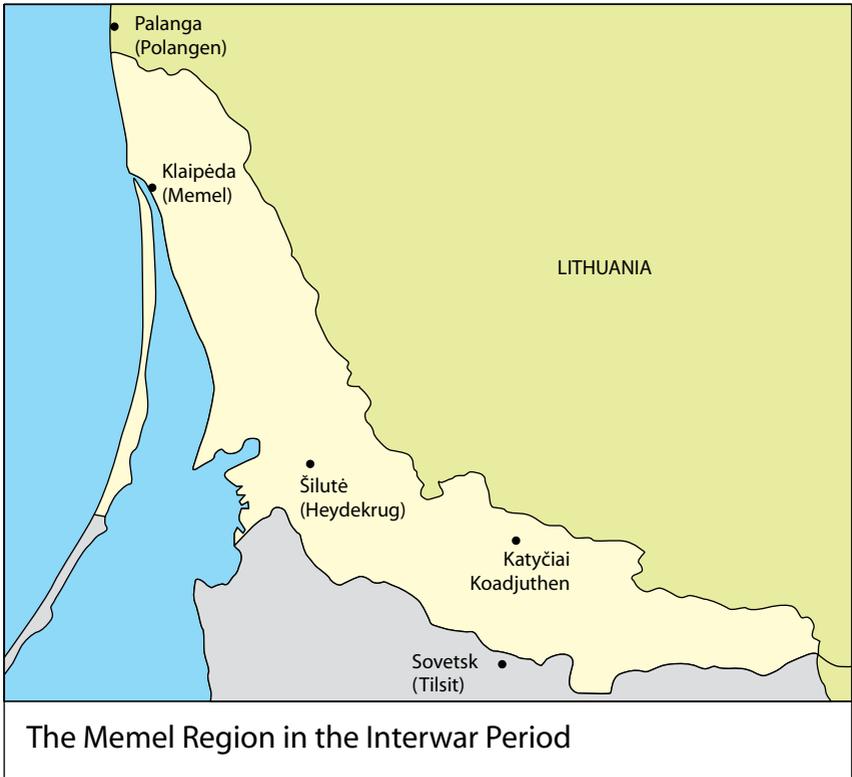
Map 3: *The Memel Region in the Interwar Period.*