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Sedan in French and German painting*

Massimo Ferrari Zumbini

Sedan: the “momentous battle” and the “debacle”

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 between the Napoleon III's France and the coalition of German states headed by Bismarck's Prussia is a forgotten conflict. It is almost as if history has placed this particular war in brackets, squeezed it between the great series of Napoleonic victories and the modern idea of total war that emerged in the summer of 1914. As late as 1989, no less a figure that Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, the man who has given such impetus to the new historiography of the First World War, began his book on the Franco-Prussian War with the words “La guerre de 1870 est une guerre oubliée”.¹ After two world wars and the mass slaughter of the twentieth century, this conflict appears a minor event for the very reason that it seems so caught within a longer chain of events. Yet this is a war that still has many interesting features, and not just from the viewpoint of political history. Undoubtedly it is the war that brought about both the dissolution of the French empire and the unification of Germany with all the accompanying shifts in the balance of power in Europe. There are, however, other important aspects connected to a wide range of historiographic methods and issues which largely began with this very conflict. These pertain to phenomena which range from “the new military history” and “visual history” to “places of memory” and “the construction of the enemy”. It is therefore interesting – and perhaps surprising – to note that given these viewpoints, this war was also the last act in a long and dramatic series of conflicts.

In fact the war which finally brought about German unification is, at one and the same time, the final war before “total war” in terms of military history, and also the final war fought before the widespread use of photography in terms of visual history. Indeed, the

*Translation by Peter Douglas.

¹ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *1870 – La France dans la Guerre* (Paris: Colin, 1989), p. 1.



Franco-Prussian War was largely depicted on canvas (and in drawings). More specifically, it was the war in which the established tradition of war painting (*Schlachtenmalerei*) and the “battaglisti” (battle painters)² had their moment of triumph before the coming of total war which, from Futurism to Expressionism, would herald a radical shift in how armed conflict was represented.

The small town of Sedan, in the Ardennes department near the Belgian border, had a central and decisive role both from a military and from an iconographic point of view. The name “Sedan” is, in fact, synonymous with the most famous battle of the whole war and is, for that very reason, the “place of memory” most frequently referenced in the whole iconography of the war. It is thus necessary to start with Sedan in order to reexamine the events and their depiction.

An episode occurred in the late afternoon of September 1st 1870 which not only decided the fate of the Franco-Prussian War, which had begun on July 19th, but also changed the history of the continent, eventually attaining mythical status in the history and collective memory of Germany, France and Europe itself.³ A white flag appeared on the bastions of the fort of Sedan and General Reille went out to proffer the surrender of Napoleon III to Wilhelm I of Prussia, who had followed the whole battle from a vantage point nearby. Napoleon wrote:

Monsieur mon frère,
N’ayant pas pu mourir au milieu de mes troupes, il ne me reste qu’à
remettre mon épée entre les mains de Votre Majesté. Je suis de votre

² On the Italian tradition, see *I battaglisti. La pittura di battaglia dal XVI al XVIII secolo*, edited by Giancarlo Sestieri (Rome: De Luca Editori d’arte, 2011), with ample illustrative material, p. 19ss.

³ On the Battle of Sedan, see in particular: Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War. The German Invasion of France* (London-New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 203ss.; Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War. The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 211ss.; François Roth, *La Guerre de 70* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), p. 101ss.; Douglas Fermer, *Sedan 1870. The Eclipse of France* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2008) and Pierre Milza, “L’année terrible”. *La guerre franco-prussienne septembre 1870-mars 1871* (Paris: éditions Perrin, 2009), p. 99ss.



Majesté le bon frère.
Napoléon.⁴

In the fort with his entire army of over 100,000 men, the French emperor, weakened by illness and by then resigned to his fate, admitted defeat. Napoleon's words, however, specifically referred to only the emperor himself (*mon épée*) and not France in general, which Napoleon did not intend to be bound to his decision in the hope that the nation would be able to carry on the war from Paris. It was, however, a total and unprecedented rout which went far beyond the disaster of Waterloo.

La capitulation est signée au début de la matinée du 2 septembre. Dans l'histoire militaire du XIXe siècle, c'est un fait sans précédent par son ampleur. Celle du général Dupont à Baylen durant la guerre d'Espagne (1808), celle des Hongrois à Villagos (1849) n'avaient pas concerné de tels effectifs. La présence de Napoléon III parmi les prisonniers accroît encore la portée du succès.⁵

Two German armies, comprising approximately 190,000 soldiers from Prussia, Saxony, Bavaria, Thuringia, Baden and Württemberg, had already completely surrounded Sedan by 11.30am after the *Gardebusaren* of the Army of the Meuse marching from the east, joined up with the Third Army arriving from the west.⁶ The French troops, beaten in the field and in the surrounding villages from the first light of day, fled in disarray, largely retreating to the fort itself.⁷

To the south in Bazeilles, the Bavarian forces had trounced the crack troops of the naval infantry, the *Marsouins*, who fought to the last man in the “*maison de la dernière cartouche*”, which was to be-

⁴ Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War. The German Invasion of France*, cit., p. 219.

⁵ François Roth, *La Guerre de 70*, cit., p. 126.

⁶ Pierre Milza, “*L'année terrible*”. *La guerre franco-prussienne septembre 1870-mars 1871*, cit., p. 110.

⁷ Douglas Fermer, *Sedan 1870. The Eclipse of France*, cit., p. 167ss.



come the scene of one of the most famous paintings of the war.⁸ To the north, between Givonne and Fleigneux, groups of French soldiers fled towards the forest of the Ardennes, seeking refuge in Belgium.⁹ Not even the desperate, almost suicidal, charges of the best squadrons of the glorious French cavalry – cuirassiers, hussars and *chasseurs d’Afrique* – managed to pierce the German infantry supported by the field artillery.¹⁰

Sedan is thus the battle that was to end the war, given the magnitude of the defeat and because it came at the end of a long series of defeats which had marked the whole course of the conflict. The German troops had been victorious because they had invaded with the utmost speed, making their way deep into French territory. On August 4th they were at Weissenburg, thus opening the road to Alsace from the north; on the 6th they were at Wörth in southern Alsace and Spicheren in the Saar, on the 14th they were at Colombey-Nouilly on the road to Metz, on the 16th at Mars-la-Tour, 20 kilometres from Metz, and on the 18th at Gravelotte. Here there was bloody battle (whence the saying: “Ça tombe comme à Gravelotte”) which led to the siege of the great fortress of Metz starting on August 20th (the same day as the siege of Strasbourg began) and which eventually led to the defeat of the whole Army of the Rhine and the capture of over 150,000 French soldiers.

On August 24th the Germans arrived at the Marne, but on the evening of the 25th German high command ordered a risky, but ultimately decisive, change of direction. Given that the other, residual French, army had not retreated towards Paris as expected, the two German armies also decided not to march towards the capital but carried out the famous right wing manoeuvre, shifting almost 200,000 soldiers along a front of over 50 kilometres. It was a lightning, complex and vast move eastwards, decisive from a strategic point of view, but difficult to pull off in practice, particularly in rainy

⁸ Dennis E. Showalter, *Das Gesicht des modernen Krieges. Sedan, 1. und 2. September 1870*, in *Schlachten der Weltgeschichte*, edited by Stig Förster *et al.* (Munich: dtv 2005), p. 238.

⁹ François Roth, *La Guerre de 70*, cit., p. 122.

¹⁰ Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War. The German Invasion of France*, cit., p. 215ss.



conditions and with battle-weary troops; on August 18th they had fought at Gravelotte and had hardly rested, also because they had had the painful task of burying 9,000 dead.¹¹

On the basis of information regarding the movement of the French troops, the German Chief of Staff, headed by Moltke, decided to take a risk and order a move which would take the whole front towards Sedan¹² and where, for the second time since Metz, an entire French army found itself surrounded with no chance of escaping as only the border with Belgium lay behind it.

The French Army arrived at Sedan with the higher ground taken by the Germans who were backed by over 500 units of heavy artillery. In the final stages of the battle, the latter was firing 600 shells a minute at the citadel, causing heavy losses, panic and outbreaks of fire.¹³

At Frénois on one of the heights, the supreme command of the allied German forces met, headed by the king of Prussia. Next to Wilhelm were the leading figures of Prussia: the heir to the throne, Chancellor Bismarck and Helmut von Moltke, the military strategist responsible for the operations of all the allied troops. This scene has been depicted many times and in many ways – in literature and in paintings – but almost all versions are based on the two most famous descriptions: the renowned 1873 account by Theodor Fontane¹⁴ and the articles that appeared in *The Times* of London by William Howard Russell, the most famous war correspondent of the age who had also covered the American Civil War and the Crimean War.¹⁵

¹¹ Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War. The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871*, cit., p. 186.

¹² Douglas Fermer, *Sedan 1870. The Eclipse of France*, cit., p. 124ss.

¹³ Karl-Heinz Frieser, *Ardennen Sedan. Militärgeschichtlicher Führer durch eine europäische Schicksalslandschaft*, edited by the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt (Frankfurt-Bonn: Report Verlag, 2006), p. 129.

¹⁴ Theodor Fontane, *Der Krieg gegen Frankreich. Band I: Der Krieg gegen das Kaiserreich* (Berlin: Nymphenburger, 1873), p. 552ss.

¹⁵ On Fontane and Russell, see Manuel Köppen, *Im Krieg gegen Frankreich. Korrespondenten an der Front. 1870 vor Paris – 1916 an der Westfront – 1940 im Blitzkrieg*, in *Kriegskorrespondenten: Deutungsinstanzen in der Mediengesellschaft*, edited by Barbara Korte and Horst Tonn (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007), p. 59ss.



A 300-metre high vantage point and the fine weather made for a clear view; by late morning observers had already realized that the siege was complete and victory was only a matter of hours away. Apart from *The Times* correspondent, another foreign observer was General Philip Sheridan, who in the American Civil War had commanded the Army of the Shenandoah which devastated Virginia in 1864 and earned Sheridan notoriety for having introduced scorched earth tactics (“The Burning”). The largest group on the summit of the hill behind the all-Prussian front line, however, was made up of the representatives of the other German states, from the kingdom of Bavaria down to the small duchy of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha.

The most famous depiction of the scene in paint is by Anton von Werner, who was to become the favourite artist at the imperial court. The famous *Sedan-Panorama* would later be hung in a gallery built for that very purpose. Thanks to a rotating platform, it was possible to follow the various phases of the battle painted on a 1,725 square metre screen and represented in three dioramas which show the main events at five-hour intervals, from the French cavalry charge to the delivery of Napoleon’s letter in which he surrenders to Wilhelm.¹⁶ For Werner, and for many other German painters, the scene had a particular solemnity because those high-ranking figures seen together on the hill are the representatives of the common will to unite all German territories in a new Reich.¹⁷

In the writings of historians who now see Germany through the lens of two world wars, there is a tendency to describe this scene emphasizing the atmosphere of the Belle Époque, as if it were an gala-like outing with the resplendent uniforms of high-sounding aristocrats:

It was now a superb day, and Moltke’s staff had found for the King a vantage-point from which a view of the battle could be obtained such as no commander of an army in Western Europe was ever to

¹⁶ *Anton von Werner. Geschichte in Bildern*, edited by Dominik Bartmann (Munich: Hirmer, 1997), p. 270ss.

¹⁷ Frank Becker, *Bilder von Krieg und Nation. Die Einigungskriege in der deutschen Öffentlichkeit Deutschlands 1864-1913* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2001), p. 478ss.



see again. In a clearing on the wooded hill above Frénois, south of the Meuse, there gathered a glittering concourse of uniformed nobilities more suitable to an opera-house or a race-course than to a climactic battle which was to decide the destinies of Europe and perhaps of the world.¹⁸

Nevertheless, if we observe those events with the hindsight of the twenty-first century, that September 1st 1870 also, and above all, prefigures various historical events that tragically mark the course of European history. Undoubtedly, the characters and the uniforms that characterized the scene around Sedan take us back to a distant past of princes and grand dukes, cuirassiers and dragoons, uhlans and hussars. Yet in the background of the panorama is the Ardennes Forest, which Hitler's armoured divisions passed through on May 1st 1940 on their way to another, even more decisive siege. On the evening of May 13th 1940, the Germans were again at Sedan and, in just two days of fighting had conquered the "sacred ground" of the now legendary Hill 301, that is, the very hill on which the aforementioned leaders had assembled.¹⁹

In reality, the military history of that momentous conflict between the German states and France also links a whole range of historical figures over various centuries. Wilhelm I of Prussia, who after his victory became the first emperor of the new Reich in January 1871, had, when very young, fought against Napoleon. Between 1806-1807 Napoleon, in turn, had brought about the dissolution of the ancient Reich (*das alte Reich*), the successor to the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, by entering Berlin and breaking up Prussia. In the same period, the Prussian general Claus von Clausewitz was a prisoner in France. His famous treatise on war was to influence the whole development of Prussian military thought from the post-Napoleonic era on. Alfred von Schlieffen also took part in the 1870 campaign. He devised the so-called Schli-

¹⁸ Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War. The German Invasion of France*, cit., p. 212.

¹⁹ Karl-Heinz Frieser, *Ardennen Sedan. Militärbistorischer Führer durch eine europäische Schicksalslandschaft*, cit., p. 224ss.



effen plan, which Germany adhered to in 1914 in an attempt to realize its ambitious and somewhat risky principal aim: totally surrounding the enemy and successfully fighting a “battle of annihilation” (*Vernichtungsschlacht*), effectively a modern Battle of Cannae, based on the great victory of Sedan.²⁰ Furthermore, taking part in the clashes in the nearby Givonne, which opened up the road to Sedan, was the young lieutenant Paul von Hindenburg, who had already fought at Sadowa. He would go on to be the most popular and powerful commander of the First World War, become President of the Republic in 1925 and appoint Adolf Hitler as head of government in 1933.

The name of Sedan, the “terre d’épreuve” of the western front, is ever-present in this chain of historical and military references. Even though Germany was defeated in the First World War and the western front was remembered more for the tragedies of Verdun and the Somme, the Germans occupied Sedan right up to the end of the conflict. Finally, in December 1944, the last German offensive in the Ardennes was halted just 25 kilometres from Sedan, which had been liberated by American troops on September 6th.²¹

The Franco-Prussian conflict was, however, brief. From the point of view of international law it only lasted ten months, that is, from France’s declaration of war on Prussia on July 19th to the definitive peace treaty with the new *Reich* signed in Frankfurt on May 10th. If we look at the actual campaigns of the war, which all took place on French soil, that period is further reduced as the first clashes were on August 4th and Paris surrendered on January 28th 1871. This marked the end of the Second Empire and totally undermined the belief that France could defend itself.

The losses, although admittedly terrible, were in no way comparable with those of the First World War, not to mention the 50,000,000 million military and civilian deaths of the Second World War. If deaths due to disease are included – which covers the ma-

²⁰ Jehuda L. Wallach, *Das Dogma der Vernichtungsschlacht. Die Lehren von Clausewitz und Schlieffen und ihre Wirkung in zwei Weltkriegen* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag 1970), p. 96ss.

²¹ Karl-Heinz Frieser, *Ardennen Sedan*, cit., p. 20s.



majority of cases – Germany suffered 50,927 losses as opposed to 1,800,000 deaths in 1914-18.²²

The fact that contemporaries, and painters of the time, made such a great myth of Sedan might now seem rather strange to us. Our retrospective evaluations of the past, however, should not diminish the real historical importance of this war, the results of which were so crucial for France, Germany and the whole of Europe. In France it brought about the fall of the Second Empire and the start of the Third Republic, marked by the civil war that followed the Commune. In Germany the Second Reich was established under Prussian hegemony, and in Europe the alarm provoked by this new continental power also affected the Russian empire.²³ More generally, Germany acquired a military prestige which, it would not be an overstatement to say, spread throughout the world. Even as early as 1836-1839, Moltke, later victor at Sedan, had been a military advisor to the Ottoman army. The victory over France also led to the adoption of the German military model in other continents, from Japan to South America:

The Prussian Military System became the envy of, and the model for, much of the world after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. Governments not only in Europe and in Asia Minor, but also as far away as Japan and China, Central and South America, turned to Prussia for military training missions and weapons and sent their best and brightest subaltern officers to study the German way of war. The States of South America in particular eagerly abandoned well-established ties to St. Cyr and Schneider-Cruzot in France to

²² François Roth, *La Guerre de 70*, cit., p. 508.

²³ On the admiring, and preoccupied, reactions of the Tsarist military authorities to the results of the strategies of the Prussian *Großer Generalstab* in the Franco-Prussian War and, in particular, to the speed and efficiency of mobilization thanks to an integrated use of the railway network, see David Alan Rich, *The Tsar's Colonels. Professionalism, Strategy and Subversion in Late Imperial Russia* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press), p. 88ss. In January 1874, the Russian Empire increased the length of compulsory military service after evaluating the efficiency of the German military machine; see Werner Benecke, *Militär, Reform und Gesellschaft im Zarenreich. Die Wehrpflicht in Russland 1874-1914* (Paderborn-Munich: Diss., 2006), p. 41ss.



forge new relations with the War Academy (Kriegsakademie) in Berlin and Friedrich Krupp in Essen. On the eve of the First World War, Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia solidly backed Germany; Berlin's "surrogate Prussians" in Santiago in Chile were revamping the armies of Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Paraguay, and Venezuela; Peru alone remained with France.²⁴

In this respect, the most striking comment on Germany's new role was made in a Parliamentary speech by Benjamin Disraeli on February 9th 1871. The former British prime minister, also with the intention of criticizing his adversary and successor Gladstone, spoke of the "German revolution", destined to be of even greater influence than the French one, with devastating consequences for the balance of power that the United Kingdom wished to maintain:

Let me impress upon the attention of the House the character of this war between France and Germany. It is no common war, like the war between Prussia and Austria, or like the Italian war in which France was engaged some years ago; nor is it like the Crimean War. This war represents the German revolution, a greater political event than the French revolution of last century. [...] There is not a diplomatic tradition which has not been swept away. You have a new world, new influences at work, new and unknown objects and dangers with which to cope, at present involved in that obscurity incident to novelty in such affairs. We used to have discussions in this House about the balance of power. [...] The balance of power has been entirely destroyed, and the country which suffers most, and feels the effects of this great change most, is England.²⁵

Germany was no longer the weak heart of Europe, playing its involuntary role in guaranteeing the balance of power between the major nations; indeed, it now appeared to be a hegemonic power itself

²⁴ William F. Sater - H. Herwig, *The Grand Illusion. The Prussianization of the Chilean Army* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 7.

²⁵ William F. Moneyppenny - George E. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield* (London: Murray, 1929), vol. 2, p. 473 and p. 474.



at the centre of the continent. The feeling that there was a new, grave threat was not only limited to the most authoritative exponents of the British political classes. For public opinion too, the role of prime adversary, that is, the nation that was the greatest threat to British power, passed from France, with its age-old revolutionary tradition, to Germany with its new military might. A short time after Sedan, the weekly magazine *All the Year Round*, founded by Charles Dickens, gave an even more pessimistic, almost apocalyptic view of the consequences of the rise of Germany, seen as a new power bent on nothing less than world domination, in Persia, in India and even threatening London itself:

Half a million of men, who have trodden down France and threatened England, may pine for fresh conquests. It may suddenly appear necessary for United Germany to win colonies, and a foothold in Central Asia, Persia or India [...] They will fly straight at London, the centre of our wealth.²⁶

This was the new Germany of the Iron Chancellor and the canons of Krupp that had replaced the Germany of “poets and philosophers” idealized by Madame de Staël in *De l’Allemagne*. There was a radical shift in power relations between Germany and France which would have profound consequences in the decades that followed, right up to the events of the summer of 1914. Sedan remained part of the collective memory of both nations, to such an extent that it suggested historical-military parallels of epoch-making proportions, from Cannae to Waterloo. The idea that defeat at Sedan had reduced France gained ground, suddenly making it a second-rate power, with much more serious consequences than those which followed Waterloo:

Thus Moltke won a battle that ranks as modern Cannae – and, unlike Hannibal, he would not fail to march on the enemy’s capital.

²⁶ Anonymous article, *Sieges of London*, in *All the Year Round* (1871), p. 497, cit. in Daniel Pick, *War Machine. The Rationalisation of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (New Haven-London: Yale Univ. Press, 1993), p. 115.



Sedan made German might feared [...] As for France, Sedan and its aftermath demoted her to the second rank among European powers more completely than Waterloo had done.²⁷

France: epic defeat and the regeneration of the nation

When seen within the context of the great artistic tradition which stretched from Louis XIV to Napoleon, the challenges facing French painters in interpreting the Franco-Prussian War seem great. There is more to consider than the stark contrast between the military glory of Napoleon's victories and the series of defeats in the Franco-Prussian War. Undoubtedly, the succession of defeats is alarming: from Alsace, Lorraine, Metz and Strasbourg to Sedan, the siege of Paris and final surrender. Already by the first half of August, Moltke's military steam roller flattened French resistance in battles that became fixed in the memories of contemporaries: at Weisenburg (August 4th), at Wörth and at Spicheren (August 6th), at Colombey-Nouilly (August 14th) at Mars-la-Tour (August 16th) and at Gravelotte (August 18th), the prelude to the surrender of Sedan itself on September 1st.

However, there are two other aspects that must be considered. These are of the utmost importance in order to understand just how deeply-felt and all-involving *La Débâcle* was, to quote the term used by Zola for the title of his 1892 novel depicting the war. The aforementioned battles transformed the German advance into a full-scale invasion, and military encounters into a people's war, at least as far as the French were concerned. It was a war, however, which ended up with the Germans entering Paris and the loss of French territories. It was not only Napoleon III who was defeated, but France and the French people.

Moreover, the invasion was even more painful if we recall that no French territories had been violated since the French campaign of 1814. This, moreover, had been against a Napoleon in decline, whose defeat at Leipzig had preceded the allies entering Paris on

²⁷ Douglas Fermer, *Sedan 1870. The Eclipse of France*, cit., p. 192 and p. 193.



March 31st of that year. Victories in Crimea, Algeria and Italy under Napoleon III had renewed and enhanced the image of a great military power. The one moment of gloom had been the disastrous Mexican adventure, whose depiction was very much ignored in French painting. Indeed, Manet's painting of the execution of the Emperor Maximilian in Mexico on June 19th 1867 caused a scandal and his work had a problematic history, very similar to Goya's *Tres de Mayo* of 1814 which had inspired it.²⁸ Manet's painting could not be displayed in France as it was a clear act of condemnation, an attack on Napoleon III who, when pulling French troops out of Mexico, had left the young emperor in the hands of Juarez's republicans. The definitive version of the painting was only seen by the general public after it was taken to Germany, having been bought by the Mannheim *Städtische Kunsthalle* in 1909.

French military painting had enjoyed a long and glorious period from Louis XIV to Napoleon. The influence of the great Napoleonic age was still felt in painting, also because of the greatness of the man whose career formed a link between various painters, from David and Gros to Gerard and Géricault. The full list, however, is much longer, and in terms of battle painting, in the strictest sense at least, the painter Horace Vernet deserves mention. Criticized by Baudelaire ("un militaire qui fait de la peinture, il est l'antithèse absolue de l'artiste"), his work is well represented in the *Galerie des batailles* at Versailles with large canvases dedicated to the victories of Wagram and Jena.

After 1871, however, French military painting found itself with a problem. How should defeat be represented? Certainly, this was not a new problem. In the end, after so many victories, even the career of Napoleon had known defeat, from the retreat from Russia to Waterloo. The iconography of defeat, although a minor phenomenon (also because the great warrior, Napoleon himself, was no longer on the scene), is marked by various approaches in depicting the most

²⁸ On the four versions that Manet painted and the links with Goya, see Michael F. Zimmermann, *Der Prozeß der Zivilisation und der Ort der Gewalt. Zur Darstellung von Gegenwart und Geschichte seit der Aufklärung*, in *Bilder der Macht - Macht der Bilder. Zeitgeschichte in Darstellungen des 19. Jahrhunderts*, edited by Stephen Germer and Michael F. Zimmermann (Munich: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1997), p. 74ss.



tragic, painful events in French history. It was a slow process, which gradually developed over the following decades, and involved painters and other artists who became the makers of the Napoleon myth in a positive sense.

Even Nicolas-Toussaint Charlet, who with his many lithographs was one of the most resourceful artists to document Napoleon's military victories, dedicated a painting in 1863 to the retreat from Russia (*Episode de la Retraite de Russie*, Museum of Lyon), which was much praised by Alfred de Musset. Another of Gros's pupils, Ferdinand Boissard, depicted the same scene with a large work (1.60 x 2.25, Museum of Rouen) which enjoyed great success at the 1835 *Salon*. The same theme was again taken up in 1856 in a work of the same name (*Louvre*) by Auguste Raffet, a pupil of Charlet, who glorified the characteristic "grognards", those veterans of the imperial Old Guard, the "vieux de la vieille", who although complaining, were the most leather-skinned and faithful of Napoleon's followers.²⁹

Napoleon's defeats of 1814 also inspired various artists. In 1820 Horace Vernet depicted an episode in which he himself had taken part. *La Barrière de Clichy - Défense de Paris, le 30 mars 1814* (Louvre) glorifies the collaborative spirit between the aged Marshal Moncey and the inexperienced National Guard soldiers defending Paris to the end.

In 1864 Ernest Meissonier depicted the Napoleon of March 1814, seen with his last remaining troops wearily crossing the sown-covered land, the background dominated by a leaden sky (*Campagne de France, 1814*, Musée d'Orsay).³⁰ Meissonier is the painter who in 1875 celebrated the Battle of Friedland of June 14th 1807, one of Napoleon's greatest victories ("Friedland vaudra Austerlitz, Iéna ou Marengo"); with the Russian army defeated, he marched on Prussia and dismembered it. The painting (New York, Metropolitan) is a tri-

²⁹ On Charlet in particular, see the essays by Bruno Foucart, *Charlet, premier et premier imagier de la légende napoléonienne*, p. 86ss. and by Christian Benoit, *Charlet ou l'éternel soldat de Napoléon*, both in *Charlet. Aux origines de la légende napoléonienne*, edited by Nicolas Bocher (Paris: Giovanangeli, 2008).

³⁰ On the long and successful career of Meissonier, who had also been admired by Delacroix, see Marc J. Gotlieb, *The Plight of Emulation. Ernest Meissonier and French Salon Painting* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), and above all p. 185ss.



umph of colour and action: the uniforms of the imperial guard are bright against a summer landscape, while the cuirassiers gallop past, enthusiastically saluting Napoleon with their swords raised. The 1864 painting, on the other hand, is extremely unusual as regards military paintings: it is small (51.5 x 76.5) and depicts no action; there is only an atmosphere of solitude and discomfort that envelopes the emperor who is on his way to final defeat.

The central theme in this iconography of defeat, however, is naturally Waterloo. Both Charlet and Raffet celebrated the heroism of the defeated French in various lithographs. The large painting by Clément-Auguste Andrieux (*La bataille de Waterloo*, Musée National du Château de Versailles) dates from 1852. These are very different works, but all focus on the sacrifice of the French, from Raffet's "retraite du bataillon sacré" to Andrieux's Raffet-influenced painting of the charge of General Milhaud's 3,500 cuirassiers against the central section of the English lines at Mont-Saint-Jean.³¹

This heroic interpretation of the defeat was also explored in literature, particularly in the popular works of Victor Hugo. His 1853 poem, *L'expiation*, became the most famous commentary on Waterloo, "ce plateau funèbre et solitaire" where "la garde impériale entre dans la fournaise", not to mention 19 of the chapters in *Les Misérables*, which recall the same scenes as those depicted in the paintings, including the charge of the cuirassiers, transformed by Hugo into mythological creatures (*C'étaient des hommes géants sur des chevaux colosses*) in chapter 10, entitled *Le plateau de Mont Saint-Jean*.³²

The *tòpos* of the "glorious defeat" thus already existed and in all truth, French paintings depicting Sedan can be seen to reach back to those that depict Waterloo.³³ On the other hand, what else can the defeated do? The glorification of heroism in spite of defeat is es-

³¹ On Waterloo in paintings, see Jacques Logie, *Waterloo. La campagne de 1815* (Brussels: Racine, 2003), p. 223ss.

³² On the relationship between Hugo and battle painting, see François Robichon, *Victor Hugo et la peinture des guerres napoléoniennes de son temps*, in *Hugo et la guerre*, edited by Claude Millet (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2004), p. 87ss.

³³ Jean-Marc Largeaud, *Napoléon et Waterloo. La défaite glorieuse de 1815 à nos jours. Waterloo dans la mémoire des français* (Paris: Boutique de l'Histoire, 2006), p. 296ss. Largeaud's extensive analysis also includes literature, see p. 324ss. on Stendhal and Hugo.



sential in order to purify the loss and hand it down to posterity; it is basically equivalent to a rite of passage, reworking the pain of defeat. It is a theme that we could say is universal, used over and over again by the defeated of many wars throughout history. For painting too, the classic model is the Battle of Thermopylae.

Nevertheless, the parallels between Waterloo and Sedan end here. Waterloo is a massive loss incurred at the end a triumphant journey, but it does not cancel the many glorious conquests that have preceded it. In the aforementioned poem by Hugo, the pain of Waterloo is always tempered by memories of greatness. The French soldiers are defeated, but they will always be the victors of many battles: “Ces derniers soldats de la dernière guerre/Furent grands; ils avaient vaincu toute la terre”. Now, however, they are vanquished. Waterloo is the end of a long line of battles, while Sedan is the start of a greater national tragedy. After Sedan, military conflict for the French becomes a people’s war, which ends up with the Germans entering Paris, the annexation of French lands and the birth of a great new power on the French border.

The motif of the “glorious defeat” is thus inevitable, but not quite enough: there is the occupation, the people’s war, “German barbarity” and the *revanche*. In this context we should mention the acts of reprisal against those unofficial combatants, the *francs-tireurs*, or resistance fighters, of this particular war in an enemy-occupied land.³⁴ There were also civilians who were considered victims of unfair reprisals involving whole villages. Paintings on this theme also appeared long after the actual events occurred, as in the case of Lucien Marchet’s 1896 work depicting the executions that took place in the village of Bazeilles, where some snipers had shot at Bavarian troops who then shot 39 inhabitants.³⁵

In the wake of these events, Sedan also became a motif for “German barbarity” perpetrated by the “hordes of Attila” against “the

³⁴ For details of these reprisals, which generally struck villages and rural areas, see François Roth, *La Guerre de 70*, cit., p. 397ss.

³⁵ The painting entitled *La débâcle* is reproduced and discussed in *Im Atelier der Geschichte. Gemälde bis 1914 aus der Sammlung des Deutschen Historischen Museums*, edited by Sabine Beneke (Dresden: Sandstein, 2012), p. 311.



civilization” of the great French nation. This idea was voiced most clearly in the appeals of Victor Hugo who returned to the “myth of Paris” as the guardian of civilization and as a symbol of progress.³⁶ In 1872 Hugo published a collection of poems tellingly entitled *L’année terrible*, complete with a prophecy addressed to the present victors: “Vous semblez nos vainqueurs, vous êtes nos vaincus”. Previously, however, just three days after Sedan, Hugo had already celebrated the same vision in which the despair of that moment is wiped away by the certainty of future triumphs, given that France is synonymous with “civilization”:

Sauver Paris, c’est plus que sauver la France, c’est sauver le monde.
Paris est le centre même de l’humanité. Paris est la ville sacrée [...]
Paris est la capitale de la civilisation.³⁷

The catastrophe of 1870 therefore entails not just a lost battle but a series of losses which converge in absolute defeat; it is a painful cycle comprising an “année terrible” and the “debacle”. For this reason painting, like literature, searched for other issues connected to this total defeat: putting the blame on the military class, attacking the emperor, and the great, problematic question of the “regeneration of the nation”. This hope in renewal corresponded with the idea of “toute une France à refaire”, the final words of Zola’s *La Débâcle*.

First, however, came the criticism. This was often extremely harsh and its target was the emperor. Whereas there was respect for the emperor who had been defeated at Waterloo, there was none for the emperor defeated at Sedan. To quote Hugo, what applied to “Napoléon le Grand” did not apply to “Napoléon le Petit”, precisely because Waterloo marked the end of a great sequence of events dominated by the colossal figure of Napoleon himself who retained

³⁶ Cfr. Karlheinz Stierle, *Der Mythos von Paris. Zeichen und Bewußtsein der Stadt* (Munich: Dt. Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1998), p. 581ss.

³⁷ On the appeal Hugo made on September 5th 1870 from which the quotation is taken, see Michael Jeisman, *Das Vaterland der Feinde. Studien zum nationalen Feindbegriff und Selbstverständnis in Deutschland und Frankreich, 1792-1918* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992), p. 191.



his greatness even in defeat. This factor was completely lacking in the Franco-Prussian War; indeed, the reverse was true, with fierce criticism of military and political leaders. Napoleon III ingloriously left the scene, the first casualty of a new government, his negative reputation persisting throughout the Third Republic.

Military commanders were criticized as incompetent and were often even accused of treason. The most sensational case was that of Marshal Bazaine, who had been named Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the Rhine in August 1870, the culmination of a brilliant career that stretched back to Crimea and the Battle of Solferino. Nonetheless, he was charged with treason and condemned to death (which he managed to avoid by fleeing to Spain) for having ordered the surrender of the besieged army at Metz. Indeed, he became a useful scapegoat for both sides: for the republicans as a demonstration of Napoleon's culpability; for the Bonapartists as someone who could shoulder all the blame.

It is easy to understand why there are so few paintings of military commanders and so many paintings in praise of Gambetta, the latter being the politician who proclaimed the republic immediately after Sedan on September 4th and who carried on the war after managing to leave the besieged capital in a hot-air balloon on October 7th. One of the few examples of paintings of military leaders is the 1878 portrait of Marshal Mac Mahon, Duke of Magenta and hero of Sebastopol, who was "lucky" enough to be wounded at Sedan and thus had been relieved of his command.³⁸ In 1873 he was even elected President of the Republic and, as head of state, commuted Bazaine's death sentence to a prison sentence.

In contrast, although the soldiers were undoubtedly seen as having been defeated, the fact that they had been at the front line of a heroic self-sacrificing resistance, made them guarantors of the regeneration. When the painters of Sedan revisited the heroic themes once used for Waterloo, they focused on individual acts of heroism and these "ordinary" heroes were given the leading roles in their dra-

³⁸ On Charles Armand-Dumaresq's painting, *Le Maréchal de Mac Mahon blessé à Sedan*, see François Rubichon, *Der Krieg von 1870/1 und die französische Militärmalerei*, in *Bilder der Macht - Macht der Bilder*, cit., p. 63.



matic retellings. Notwithstanding defeat, the greatness of the nation was confirmed. The clearest proof of this phenomenon is to be found in an article published in the “Gazette des Beaux-Arts” in 1885 and dedicated to Alphonse de Neuville, the painter who was the most representative of this apologist genre. Despite the bleak military facts, the moral side of the issue continued to provide comfort, that is, the knowledge that French soldiers “did not die without glory”, a theme with a direct link to that of the “glorious defeated”:

Il nous a montré par quels efforts héroïques nos soldats ont essayé de conjurer le sort et, quand nous les voyons écrasés par des forces supérieures, au moins pouvons-nous penser avec lui qu'ils ne sont pas tombés sans gloire.³⁹

Much of the iconography of the Franco-Prussian War thus concerns individual episodes within a battle and show French soldiers distinguishing themselves despite the tragic conclusion. Clearly, there are various differences in terms of chronology and typology. As time passed, public opinion changed. For almost 20 years there was a constant flow of painted scenes, which, when taken together, really seem as if they are conforming to stereotype, as the titles themselves – often complete with exclamation marks – suggest: *En avant!*, *Aux armes!*, *Suprême effort!*, *Au drapeau!* and so on. These are patriotic paintings in the purest sense, which, ignoring defeat, tend to present the events of 1870 as the last flowering of the Napoleonic tradition, celebrating something between “élan” and “French fury”.

In these paintings, “la charge”, the attack of the heavy cavalry, is a favourite scene. It became part of a fixed iconography of glory in battle and, in depicting people and action, provided painters with the chance to show off their technical skills to the full. The painter concentrated on the individual courageous and heroic event as this remained as such despite defeat. Capturing the action close-up was a favoured option as far as composition was concerned. This allowed

³⁹ Cfr. Robert Jay, *Alphonse de Neuville's "The Spy" and the Legacy of the Franco-Prussian War*, in “Metropolitan Museum Journal”, 19/20 (1986), p. 151.



for the dynamic quality of the charge to be depicted in great detail and to powerful visual effect, especially as the horse was often charging in the direction of the viewer. The sheer force of the attack calls to mind various parallels; there are similarities to an “approaching avalanche” effect and to those famous images from the early days of cinema showing trains rushing towards the spectator. This dramatic quality of the action is further enhanced by the addition in the foreground of a cavalryman who has already fallen or who is in the process of falling along with his horse. There are many examples of this type of painting, from the charge of the dragoons at Gravelotte, painted by Henry Dupray in 1873,⁴⁰ to the charge of the cuirassiers at Wörth painted by Aimé Morot in 1887.⁴¹

It is for this group of paintings, however, that a diachronic approach is apt. As the events of the Franco-Prussian War faded into the past, the vivid, emotion-laden memory of them also faded, above all for the new generation who had not experienced the *débâcle* directly. This dimming of enthusiasm was also an effect of the excessive exploitation of patriotic and apologist aspects,⁴² to the extent that after almost 30 years of battle pictures of this type, critical voices were being raised. In 1899 Urban Gohier, in *L'armée contre la nation*, wrote ironically about such paintings, concluding that if you counted all the dead or imprisoned German soldiers depicted, you would get a total that was greater than the number of German soldiers who had actually fought in those few months of the war:

Dans les Salons de peinture, depuis vingt-cinq ans, plus de cadavres allemands ont jonché les champs de bataille, plus de prisonniers alle-

⁴⁰ John Milner, *Art, War and Revolution in France 1870-1871. Myth, Reportage and Reality* (New Haven - London: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), p. 49.

⁴¹ François Rubichon, *Der Krieg von 1870/1 und die französische Militärmalerei*, in *Bilder der Macht - Macht der Bilder*, cit., p. 69.

⁴² The *Société des Artistes français*, responsible for the organization of the *Salons des Beaux-Arts*, is also responsible for the photographic collection of the works exhibited between 1864 and 1901 and acquired or commissioned by the French state: *Oeuvres exposées au salon annuel organisé par le Ministère de l'Instruction publique, des Cultes et des Beaux-Arts au Palais des Champs-Élysées à Paris. Tableaux commandés ou acquis par le Service des Beaux-Arts*. The digital version of the annual catalogues (*Les albums photographiques des*



mands ont défilé sur les tableaux, que l'Allemagne n'avait mis d'hommes en ligne pendant toute la guerre.⁴³

An eloquent example of this new climate regarded the treatment of the much-loved cavalry charge. In 1911 Pierre-Victor Robiquet produced a painting with a subject identical to that chosen by Morot in 1887, although Robiquet's painting was called *En folie: mort du colonel de Lacarre*. The compositional elements are the same: the falling cavalryman in the foreground and the effect of the galloping horses approaching the viewer headlong. Now, however, the title is rather ambiguous, echoing the heated debate on the usefulness of "suicide attacks" against an infantry that is so well-backed up by artillery.

Ultimately, there was something else which contributed to changing painters' attitudes to the war. Towards the end of the century, the prestige of the army was threatened by the Dreyfus affair which was again in the spotlight after Zola's *J'accuse* of January 1898. From this moment, the number of paintings that renounce any sense of triumphalism increase, documenting instead the reality of the defeat. The most representative artist here is Pierre Lagarde.⁴⁴ With a series of paintings which begin in 1902 with *La Retraite* and concluded with *Année terrible* and *La Débâcle*, Lagarde was in perfect accord with Zola's novels and their criticism of the political and military actions of Napoleon III.

Salons de 1864 à 1901) is now part of the collections of the State Archives and can be consulted using the following link: <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/arcade/salons.htm>. For examples of important works illustrating different trends in battle painting, see for 1873 *Les turcos à Wissembourg*, by Charles Castellani (F/21/7643 folio 13, catalogue no. 245) and *Reconnaissance en avant des forts, pendant le siège de Paris*, by Léon du Paty (F/21/7643 folio 11, catalogue no. 519). For 1874 see *Souvenir du champ de bataille de Woerth* by Paul Emile Antoine Morlon (F/21/7644 folio 3, catalogue no. 1351) and *Un escadron du premier régiment de cuirassiers à Sedan*, again by Castellani (F/21/7644 folio 7, catalogue no.332).

⁴³ Cfr. François Robichon, *Representing the 1870-1871 War, or the Impossible Revanche*, in *Nationalism and French Visual Culture, 1870-1914*, edited by June Hargrove (New Haven-London: Yale Univ. Press, 2005), p. 98.

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 93.



There is, however, another type of painting that should not be forgotten, above all for the work of Edouard Detaille and Alphonse de Neuville, not to mention Ernest Meissonier. The paintings that they dedicated to the war stand the test of time rather well, not only in terms of the high quality of the execution, but also because they put forward a more subtle (and therefore more acceptable) interpretation of the defeat. It could be argued that they succeed in exorcising the defeat without ignoring it. The ultimately stereotypical image of the cavalry charge had celebrated the individual act of heroism, but averted the question of defeat. Detaille, and to an even greater extent Neuville, take defeat as the given point of departure, focusing on the heroism of the defence put up by those who have already been overwhelmed by superior forces. Nevertheless, this forceful enemy that invades and occupies the country remains hidden in the background and hardly appears in these paintings.

These artists are not interested in examining the causes of the many battles lost by the French. In their best paintings they do not concentrate on the decisive point in the battle when the outcome is still uncertain; indeed, those earlier scenes of the glorious French cavalry charging forward might well make one believe that they are depictions of victory. These painters' attention, on the contrary, is on the heroic acts of French soldiers who have already been beaten, in the moments of final resistance against a greater force which has already prevailed and is even more threatening in that its presence is indistinct. The French soldiers are well-defined figures, French citizens defending French soil and capable of self-sacrifice, while the enemy is an obscure mass which, although it has evidently overwhelmed the French defences, either does not appear in the painting at all or is so far in the background that it is indistinct.

Three paintings are particularly important as far as Neuville is concerned. A pupil of Delacroix, Neuville had already exhibited at the *Salon* in 1859 with a painting of the Crimean War and he was himself an officer in the Franco-Prussian conflict. At the 1873 *Salon* he exhibited *Les dernières cartouches*, which referred to an episode during the Battle of Sedan. On September 1st in the nearby village



of Bazeilles, the Bavarian troops overwhelmed the last resisting French forces who had been trying to halt the German advance on the fortress of Sedan. The village had been bombarded and set on fire, and the final act was about to take place following the arrival of the Bavarian soldiers. About 50 marksmen of the French navy, who had barricaded themselves into a small building, managed to keep the enemy at bay, surrendering only after they had fired “the last round” to which the title of the painting refers. This is a quintessentially military subject, and is not limited to French art; indeed there are often more tragic results, that is, the encounter concludes not with surrender, but with the ultimate sacrifice. It is therefore quite common for such episodes to become excuses for overblown patriotic rhetoric, making it difficult to distinguish between the heroic acts that really took place and their subsequent transformation into jingoistic narrative.⁴⁵ Without doubt, it is an episode that even today arouses much interest in recent histories of the Franco-Prussian War, to the extent that historians can even get the name of the painter wrong:

Encerclés, écrasés sous un déluge de balles et d’obus, des soldats appartenant à l’infanterie de marine, qui, retranchés au premier étage d’une maison d’habitation, se battent jusqu’à la dernière cartouche. L’affaire a été si âpre qu’à la férocité du combat succède la sauvagerie de la soldatesque déchaînée. Le commandant Lambert échappe de justesse à l’exécution, mais trois autres officiers français sont fusillés sur place en même temps que des habitants du village. L’épisode sera immortalisé par le peintre Édouard Detaille [*it was actually Alphonse de Neuville*] dans une toile connue sous le nom de *La Maison des dernières cartouches*.⁴⁶

Neuville interpreted the episode focusing exclusively on a few French soldiers (seven to be precise), who, barricaded into one of the

⁴⁵ The painting is still in the central room of the *Maison de la Dernière Cartouche* in Bazeilles, the museum dedicated to the battle and managed by the *Comité national des Traditions des Troupes de marine*.

⁴⁶ Pierre Milza, “L’année terrible”. *La guerre franco-prussienne, septembre 1870-mars 1871*, cit., p. 110.



rooms of the building, were trying to hold out. The whole scene is the interior the room and no German is present. In fact the only link to the world outside is the window through which one of the French soldiers is firing “the last round”, as seems evident given the state of the other soldiers who are either wounded or resigned to events as they can no longer fight. Opposite the window there is even a soldier who, although not wounded, is leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets, clearly showing that he has no more rounds to fire.

Several years later, Neville exhibited two paintings at the *Salon* that have direct links to his 1873 painting which by then had become one the most effective set pieces in exorcising the defeat. His *La Défense de la porte de Longboyau* (Paris, Musée de l'Armée) of 1879 depicts the attempt to break the siege of Paris on October 21st 1870. Twelve battalions backed by the artillery had left the fortress of Mont Valérien in an attempt to break through the *Cernirungslinie* that the Prussian infantry had formed around the capital.⁴⁷ The painting, however, does not show the French attack but its retreat, that is, the moment of defeat in a composition that is similar to the earlier one depicting the “dernière cartouche”. In fact in the middle of the painting there are French soldiers who have been forced to return to the fortress and are now trying to stop the Prussians from entering. The scene is divided into three sections: in the foreground there are the French dead, while in the background we can see German soldiers, by now at the entrance. In the middle are French soldiers, battling with what strength remains them, so much so that these beaten-back, would-be attackers are now reduced to defending the entrance using their own bodies to form a barrier, shoring up the gate which the mass of enemy troops is pushing against. There are no rounds of ammunition left here either, and the last line of French defence is made up of the bodies of the soldiers themselves and one bayonet, thrust through the bars of the gate at the invading troops.

⁴⁷ The episode which Neuville depicts in this painting is described in the war dispatches (*Vom Kriegsschauplatz*) of October 26th 1870. Cfr. the *Amtspresse Preußens* digital collection of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, <http://amtspresse.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/vollanzeige.php?file=9838247/1870/-10-26.xml&s=2>.



In Neuville's painting of 1881, the symbolism of this image of the final, ill-fated attempt to defend a gateway from the enemy is taken even further. This canvas depicts the Battle of Saint-Privat of August 18th 1870, where over 110,000 French soldiers were pitted against almost 190,000 German troops. Neuville is not interested in either the decisive stages of the conflict or the cavalry charges so popular with other painters of military scenes. In fact, he again chooses to depict the circumstances of defeat, evoking the very moment when the enemy is entering the last refuge of the French: the cemetery. There is therefore another gate, by now forced open by the pressure of troops of the Saxon regiment, which this time does not lead to a fortress, but to a graveyard. *Le cimetière de Saint-Privat* (Musée d'Orsay) thus becomes, quite literally, an epitaph of the *débâcle*, the funereal depiction of a momentous defeat. There is heroism, it is true, but this is the heroism of soldiers reduced to defending themselves in a cemetery. It calls to mind that subject, common in European painting, of the "triumph of death", though now interpreted in a military, rather than religious key. In this way defeat assumes an apocalyptic significance; just beyond the cemetery walls are flames from houses on the point of collapse, while in the cemetery itself lie the bodies of dead soldiers among the graves, surrounded by stone crosses and swathed in gun smoke.

A similar approach can be found in the paintings of Edouard Detaille, a pupil of Meissonier and a friend of Neuville.⁴⁸ Both were soldiers who took part in the defence of Paris, and they depicted different stages of these battles. Detaille chose to focus on the Battle of Champigny, which concluded the *grande sortie*, that is, the most serious attempt to break the siege, the failure of which sealed the fate of Paris. On November 30th over 60,000 French regulars and the *Garde Mobile* left Paris and crossed the Marne, retaking various positions occupied by the Germans including Champigny-sur-Marne. Yet Detaille, like Neuville, eschews these French attacks and skirmishes in open countryside. He concentrates instead on the final moments of resistance of the French, who defend themselves in Champigny from the attacking

⁴⁸ On Detaille's paintings depicting the Franco-Prussian War, see François Robichon, *Édouard Detaille. Un siècle de gloire militaire* (Paris: Giovanangeli, 2007), p. 21ss.



Wurttemberg division of the German Third Army. Here too there is no German soldier in view and the whole scene is bordered by the wall around the village where the French are defending themselves. Some of them are shooting, but most are involved in barricading the gates, carrying benches, tables and barrels to block the entrance. As in the aforementioned painting by Neuville, there is a large gateway in the middle of the scene, the final threshold that is about to give way under the pressure of an enemy that although not seen, overwhelms: “Ils venaient comme une avalanche, et tout était fini”.⁴⁹

This time, however, we have before us a painting which is paradoxical in every sense: the besieged are the very same soldiers who had left Paris to break the siege. Now they are again under siege, although this time not in the capital, but a small village. Detaille’s painting of 1879 is, in fact, entitled *La Défense de Champigny* (Metropolitan) and depicts the final stages of the French counter attack, that is, the fighting on December 2nd that preceded the withdrawal from Champigny. This occurred on the following day when the French troops retreated to Paris under the command of General Ducrot, the man who had declared on November 29th that he would return to Paris only if he was victorious or dead.

All these works represent not only military propaganda or the patriotic sentiments of a defeated and humiliated nation. Taken together, they present the public with a metamorphosis, or transfiguration, of the defeat which can lead to a prospect of renewal. It can clearly be seen that French paintings of Sedan goes beyond the *tòpos* of the “glorious defeat” which had been monopolized by the artists who interpreted Waterloo. These paintings revisited the past, but with attention to the ongoing debate which accompanied the defeat. Seen within the overall question of a thorough “regeneration” of France, the fires of this debate were also stoked by the specific matter of regeneration through the army,⁵⁰ considered by

⁴⁹ Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War. The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871*, cit., p. 278.

⁵⁰ On this heated debate, which took its most bitter turn after the defeat of 1871 and then again during the Dreyfus affair, see Raoul Girardet, *La société militaire de 1815 à nos jours* (Paris: Perrin, 1998), p. 121ss.



many as the *arche sainte* of the nation in that its role was indispensable in order to achieve *revanche*:

Es schien in der Tat so zu sein, daß nicht nur in der Nationalversammlung, sondern von allen Franzosen eine Erneuerung, eine moralische Reform der Nation über ihre Armee verlangt wurde. Die großen Maler dieser Zeit wie Ernest Meissonier, Alphonse de Neuville und Edouard Detaille machten dies in ihren Werken deutlich. Sie verfolgten fortan einen patriotischen Stil, der sich zu einer Schule weiterentwickelte, und heute wahrscheinlich als militaristische Propaganda abklassifiziert würde!⁵¹

The painter who dedicated most works to the loss of French territories – Alsace and part of Lorraine – was Albert Bettannier, born in the border town Metz, and who opted to take French citizenship in 1872. His painting, *La tache noire* (Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum), dates from 1872 and brings together the classic elements of the patriotic view of the subject. In a schoolroom a teacher is showing his pupils a large map where a black area is clearly visible; these are the *provinces perdues*. In the foreground is a pupil dressed in the uniform of the *bataillons scolaires*, the group of school students founded in July 1882 to encourage sports activities, but actually also to encourage young people to sign up for military training. The instantly recognizable badge of the *Légion d'Honneur* is seen on the breast of one of the boys in the front row, his white jacket standing out from the other sombrely dressed students. Just to complete the military reference, Bettannier adds two details to emphasize the parallels between school and barracks: behind the teacher's desk is a military drum, while in the background there is a rack holding rifles.

Bettannier clearly had a vested interest in the subject given that he came from Lorraine. Nevertheless, it is also important to take the date of its composition into consideration. The painting was exhibited at the *Salon* in May 1888, that is, it is bound to reflect a sensitiv-

⁵¹ Frédéric Guelton, *Die politische Macht und die Armee zu Beginn der Dritten Republik 1871 bis 1881*, in *Das Militär und der Aufbruch in die Moderne 1860-1890*, edited by Michael Epkenkans and Gerhard P. Groß (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2003), p. 46.



ity to the idea of the *revanche* which was forming in a period which also saw the rise of General Boulanger, known, in fact, as *Général Revanche*.

One of Detaille's most famous works can also be seen in this context. *Le Rêve*, (Musée d'Orsay) was shown at the *Salon* of 1888 where it won a prize before being bought by the state and displayed in the French pavilion at the Universal Exhibition of 1889. This large canvas (400 x 300) is divided into two sections by the low line of the horizon, which accentuates the sky above where various tones of grey cloud are shot through by a single band of light from the setting sun. The lower part depicts a flat, stark land where a long line of soldiers are resting at the end of an evidently lengthy and exhausting march. It is a military scene, but this is not a war; these are young soldiers who have just finished a training exercise and have fallen asleep on the ground. The scene is a realistic one: this is the classic overnight stop where the troops sleep in the open air without any tents, their weapons at their side and just their uniforms for cover. The sky in the upper part of the painting covers two thirds of the canvas and it is here that we see the dream referred to in the title. A long line of soldiers, mostly on horseback, is emerging from the clouds with flags unfurled. It is these flags, as well as some of the uniforms that can be made out among the clouds, that allow us to identify the troops. In the foreground the soldiers of Napoleon's *Grande Armée* are immediately apparent, while the standard bearers of the army of the revolution are also clearly visible. In the middle, however, there are also troops gathered around the white standard of the Bourbons bearing the French *fleur-de-lis*.

The young soldiers therefore exist in two dimensions: real and symbolic. They are the present-day representatives of an army trying to overcome the terrible wounds inflicted by the defeat at Sedan, but they are also fully aware of the glories of the past which were won under various regimes. There was the French Revolution and the miracle of 1792, as well as the triumphs of the Napoleonic era, but there were also the victories of the restoration and the successful Spanish expedition of 1823 which won the praise of



Chateaubriand for its anti-Napoleonic aims. It is easy to understand the success of the painting and why it was reproduced on such a large scale, from newspapers to calendars. The dream of the *revanche* smoothes away past conflicts and all past victories belong to the whole of France in that they demonstrate the greatness of the nation. Valmy and Jemappes, Austerlitz and Wagram, Trocadero and Algeria: from 1792 to 1830 a whole series of brilliant military victories unfurls, which, taken together, create a common military consciousness. They are *lieux de mémoire* for the new generation and thus vouch for the redemption of the nation humiliated at Sedan.

This celebration of a glorious collective memory found such favour with the public that Detaille returned to the same subject in 1905. But what in 1888 was presented as a dream of young soldiers now became the *Chevauchée de la gloire*, celebrated throughout the country in that most sacred of places: the Panthéon. In fact Detaille's new work adorned the apse of the Panthéon and repeated in the "ride of glory" the same figures used in "the dream" of 1888, as the artist explained:

Les cavaliers et fantassins qui se ruent vers la gloire, apportant par brassées les trophées conquis, ce sont les gens de Jemmapes et ceux de Valmy, les grenadiers à cheval de Marengo, les chasseurs et mamelouks d'Austerlitz, dragons d'Espagne et fantassins d'Égypte, hussards d'Iéna ou cuirassiers de Montmiral et de Champaubert, tous chargés de leur glorieux butin.⁵²

There is another painting which, while depicting events of the Franco-Prussian War, blends historical fact with the imagination, real people with allegorical figures. It is entitled *Le siège de Paris (1870-1871)*, and was begun in 1871 and finished in 1884. It is an unusual piece, of limited size (53 x 70), which is now in the Musée d'Orsay. The artist is Ernest Meissonier, an acclaimed painter who was known throughout Europe and whose paintings of Napoleon

⁵² Quoted in François Robichon, *Édouard Detaille. Un siècle de gloire militaire*, cit., p. 120.



I have already been discussed. The unusual feature here also derives from the fact that Meissonier refused, and refused quite blatantly, to include even one German soldier in his paintings. In fact, in this painting we only see the French defending Paris, a scene Meissonier was familiar with as he himself had taken part in the defence of the city alongside, amongst others, Manet, whose commanding officer he was.⁵³

Meissonier brought together the two aspects of the siege: the heroism and the desperation. In the background can be seen the fires caused by the German bombardments, while in the foreground there are several French soldiers who are either dead or dying. Between these, the middle section of the painting is filled with figures standing in a row, almost as if they are lining up for something. Here Meissonier wanted to depict the various roles in the defence, from the soldiers loading the cannons on the left-hand side of the painting to the civilians carrying someone wounded on a stretcher on the right and seem as if they are about to exit the painting.

Meissonier, the first painter to win supreme recognition and be awarded the *Légion d'Honneur*, is known for his extreme realism and his minutely observed reconstructions of historical events, a detailed approach which covers everything from arms to uniforms. In this painting, however, he has combined scenes and figures, which, although all part of the long siege, are in reality from different phases of it. United by a common destiny are Colonel Dampierre, identifiable by his red sash, who died at Bagneux in October 1870, Captain Néverlée, crushed by a horse in the foreground, killed at Villiers, and Colonel Franchetti, fatally wounded on November 30th. Even more conspicuous in the centre of the painting is the dying Henri Regnault, the painter who was killed aged 27 at the second Battle of Buzenval in January 1871.⁵⁴

⁵³ On the parallel, but ultimately diverse, careers of Meissonier and Manet, see Ross King, *The Judgement of Paris. Manet, Meissonnier and an Artistic Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006). For the period of the war and the siege of Paris, see in particular p. 272ss.

⁵⁴ Marc J. Gotlieb, *Legends of the Painter Hero: Remembering Henri Regnault*, in *Nationalism and French Visual Culture, 1870-1914*, cit., p. 101ss.



Above all, however, Meissonier goes beyond his usual realistic approach through the inclusion of allegorical figures which loom above the other figures. In fact in the middle of the painting towers a large figure. This is the image of Paris, symbolized by a woman (the painter's wife) standing next to a tattered French flag and draped in a black veil with a hooded cape made of lion's skin.

Critics interpret this woman as an allegory of courage (particularly as her head is covered with the skin of a lion), and this is most likely true.⁵⁵ For this very reason, however, I would like to add a further reference which also springs to mind when one thinks of female figures as icons of courage: Delacroix's famous *Liberty Leading the People* shown at the *Salon* of 1831. She too is at the centre of a battle and is depicted with the flag of the Republic.

It could be said that Meissonier takes up, but reverses Delacroix's image: the latter's thrilling, passionate figure corresponds to Meissonier's, who towers above the remains of a barricade, also surrounded by the dead and the wounded. But faced with the *débâcle*, the enthusiasm of 1830 necessarily gives way to the resignation of 1871, the young woman forging her way forward replaced by an aging, static woman, who, however, still grips her sword. In fact in Meissonier's painting, there is one final threat approaching. On the left-hand side of the painting is another female figure who is emaciated and semi-naked. This is the allegory of famine, entering the painting from above and heralding the final trial that awaits the inhabitants of the city under siege. And this female figure also brings, perched on her arm, the Prussian eagle.

These two paintings, Detaille's *Le Rêve* and Meissonier's *Le siège de Paris*, evidence yet another aspect. They both show that not all paintings depicting the Franco-Prussian War can be classified as "extreme realism". The following quotation gives an idea of what is usually expected of such works:

Der Dokumentarsinn der Epoche fand hier universelle Nahrung für Text und Bilder vor [...]. Nicht mehr die Komposition aus der Idee,

⁵⁵ Constance Cain Hungerford, *Ernest Meissonier. Master in his Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), p. 137ss.



der Report der Wirklichkeit selbst war Kunst. Es verwundert daher nicht, daß erstmals mit den Darstellungen dieses Krieges die Muster einer Schlachten- und Kriegsmalerei entwickelt wurden, die mit der naturalistischen Perfektion zugleich das Ende und den Umschlag des Mediums Malerei anzeigen.⁵⁶

The “naturalistische Perfektion” is the dominant characteristic, but there are, however, some important exceptions. The usefulness of such a label, is of course, more than valid when comparing painting depicting the Franco-Prussian War with the paintings that immediately preceded and then characterized the First World War:

Die Kunst von 1870 repräsentiert das Ende der Historienmalerei im klassischen Sinne. Sie ist das letzte Beispiel für eine Militärmalerei, in welcher der menschliche Körper noch intakt bleibt, handlungsfähig, selbstbestimmt, weder völlig mechanisiert (wie im Futurismus) noch ausschließlich Opfer (wie im Expressionismus).⁵⁷

On the other hand, we need only include an artist like Gustav Doré in our discussion to realize immediately how the term “realism” cannot comprehend all war painting. If we therefore go beyond battle painting in the strictest sense, and broaden the scope to all aspects of war, we can add other diverse artists, from Doré to Daumier, who were also involved in illustrating events connected to the conflict. Both include allegorical figures in their works and these often become the main focus. Of Daumier’s many representations of 1870-71, we need only mention *La France-Prométhée et l’aigle-vautour*.⁵⁸ France-Prometheus has played with fire and is now tied to a

⁵⁶ Ekkehard Mai, „Ja, das ist der Krieg!“. Zur Militär- und Schlachtenmalerei im Kaiserreich, in *Bilder der Macht - Macht der Bilder*, cit., p. 246.

⁵⁷ Rachel Esner, *Gloria victis. Französische Malerei des Deutsch-Französischen Krieges*, in *Bilder der Macht - Macht der Bilder. Zeitgeschichte in Darstellungen des 19. Jahrhunderts*, cit., p. 399s.

⁵⁸ The *Daumier-Register* containing photographs of approximately 4,000 lithographs is extremely useful for the works of Daumier depicting the war and the “French crisis”: (<http://www.daumier-register.org/login.php?startpage>). *La France-Prométhée et l’aigle-vautour*, published in the magazine “Charivari” on February 13th 1871, is number 3, 847.



rock, helpless against the brutality of the vulture, represented here by the Prussian eagle.

Doré, who was from Strasbourg and took part in the defence of Paris in 1871, painted three great works on the final defeat: *La Défense de Paris*, *L'Aigle Noir de Prusse* and *L'Énigme*.⁵⁹ Becoming increasingly gloomy and apocalyptic in tone (all three paintings are *en grisaille*), Doré illustrated the fall of Paris and the humiliation of France, which is always symbolized by a winged female figure. In the first painting she is standing, defending the great gates to the city, but she is already surrounded by the dead and wounded of France. In the next painting she has fallen onto the body of a dead French soldier, her sword broken, by now defenceless against the Prussian eagle. In the third, the allegory dominates completely. *L'Énigme* (Musée d'Orsay) is also a large work (195 x 130) and depicts that great traumatic moment, the siege of Paris. Buildings on fire can be seen in the background and in the foreground several dead bodies are strewn across the ground. In contrast to Meissonier's painting, however, there are relatively few corpses (seven to be precise) and none are well-known figures. The inhabitants of Paris are represented as anonymous participants, as Doré does not want to record specific acts of heroism, but to evoke the tragic fate of a people. In fact between a Paris that is burning, seen in the distance, and the foreground of decaying bodies, what stands out on a hill in the centre is the figure who symbolizes the enigma of all human destinies *par excellence*: the Sphinx. The winged figure of France looks into her eyes, beseeching her to give an answer that can explain the meaning of this tragedy.

The painting is steeped in tones of grey, from the sky darkened with the smoke of the fires to the cold hues of the dead bodies lying on the burnt ground. As with Meissonier, it seems to me that another aspect can be considered when interpreting this painting. We could mention, in fact, the classic theme of the *lamentatio*, taken in the most religious sense, that is, the desolation of Jeremiah's vision of a de-

⁵⁹ For a discussion of the works in which Doré depicted the defeat, see Lisa Small, *L'Année Terrible and Political Imagery, in Fantasy and Faith. The Art of Gustave Doré*, edited by Eric Zafran *et al.* (New Haven-London: Yale Univ. Press, 2007), p. 32ss.



stroyed Jerusalem. Doré's 1871 painting is such an apocalyptic vision, produced some ten years after his illustrations for Dante's *Inferno*.

French paintings of the war thus included a vast range of interpretations of the conflict that went far beyond the typical cavalry charge. This was the most popular and certainly the most-loved scene, but it does in fact represent only the initial phase in the response to the Franco-Prussian War. Paintings become much more complex when looking at the problem of evaluating the war which in this context meant questioning the significance and the consequences of the defeat, putting to one side all those charges of the cuirassiers, picturesque as they are. The cavalry charges end, the defeat remains, together with a great doubt as to the future of France.

We have followed a path which has led from the fervour of heroism seen through paradigmatic episodes (such as Neuville's *Les dernières cartouches*) to Doré's meta-historic, apocalyptic vision of a collective enigma. What remains, however, is the interpretative motif of a defeat which assumes epic proportions, both for the soldier who has fought to the limits of heroic self-sacrifice, and for the nation, bowed and humiliated by a fate that has devastated everyone: soldiers, marksmen and civilians alike.

To conclude, if we take up all the themes that have emerged in this discussion, from the *glorieux vaincus* of the many lost battles to the army celebrated as the *arche sainte* of the nation and guarantor of the *revanche*, we can say that French painting of the war must be defined in a way that not only comprehends the "glorious defeat", but also goes well beyond it. It can therefore be said that while this art depicts the epic of the vanquished, it is also the start of a regeneration for the whole nation.

This, moreover, corresponds precisely to the declaration of intent that Neuville made to the critic Gustave Goetschy on the occasion of the 1881 *Salon*:

Je désire raconter nos défaites dans ce qu'elles ont eu d'honorable pour nous, et je crois donner ainsi un témoignage d'estime à nos soldats et à leurs chefs, un encouragement pour l'avenir. Quoi qu'on



dise, nous n'avons pas été vaincus sans gloire, et je crois qu'il est bon de le montrer.⁶⁰

Germany: brotherhood in arms and national unity

It might be surmised that all of these thorny issues did not exist for German painters, given that they did not have to face the hermeneutic problem of defeat. Nevertheless, even for German art of the time, there are various levels of representation and evaluation regarding the meaning of victory and this led to the creation of a body of work that aimed at attributing a higher purpose to the war. The epic proportions of the defeat suffered by the French were matched on the German side by a celebration of victory. This was natural, but it was also a victory that was the legitimization of a national unity which had been achieved through a brotherhood in arms (*Waffenbruderschaft*).

Undoubtedly there was also an initial, more simplistic and more immediate stage in German art that was limited to the mere representation of military action. Here, obviously, the image of victory on the battlefield held sway, and in fact works of this type were similar to their French equivalents, involving extreme realism and a decided taste for cavalry charges.⁶¹ In the first place this was based on having a subject in common and on a tradition of battle painting shared throughout Europe. Moreover, these paintings were almost always destined for the same "market" which, through official exhibitions and state acquisition (or acquisition by individual states in the case of Germany), was governed by shared aesthetic criteria. This affinity was also caused in part by artists often travelling between countries, a fluidity of movement that dated from before the war

⁶⁰ Cited in François Rubichon, *L'armée française vue par les peintres. 1870-1914* (Paris: Herscher, 1998), p. 28.

⁶¹ The great popularity of paintings with cavalry scenes in Germany also caused the commanders of other sections of the military to react. Through the records office of the General Staff they complained to the emperor, arguing (ultimately successfully) that the commission responsible for making decisions about the state acquisition of paintings should adopt a form of equal representation. On this, see Jörn Grabowski, *Leitbilder einer Nation. Zur Präsentation von Historien- und Schlachtengemälden in der Nationalgalerie*, in *Geschichte in Bildern*, cit., p. 98.



and led to shared experience. Anton von Werner, the most important painter at the imperial German court, was a great admirer of Meissonier, whose paintings he had studied in Paris in 1865, while Emil Hüntten, one of the leading members of the Düsseldorf School, had been one of Vernet's pupils in Paris.

It was the Düsseldorf School that played an important role in depicting the Franco-Prussian War. The school had been founded in 1819 as the *Königlich-Preussische Kunstakademie*, and it won international recognition thanks to the two men who directed it in its first few decades: Peter Cornelius and Friedrich Wilhelm Schadow. Both shared a past as members of the Nazarene movement, but Cornelius, the first director, was almost immediately summoned to Munich and ended his career in Berlin, whereas Schadow, son of the more famous Johann Gottfried (the architect who had left his mark on neo-Classical Berlin) directed the academy from 1829 to 1856. The *Historienmalerei* was the main current of the School where Carl Friedrich Lessing was another leading figure. Many of the artists who were called upon to celebrate the German victory were part of this tradition, from Wilhelm von Camphausen, who died in 1885, to his pupil Emil Hüntten, who died in 1902.

Camphausen⁶² was already noted as a painter of battles during the war with Denmark in 1864 (which he followed in person) and now he dedicated himself, often by commission, to the events of 1870-71. In particular, he specialized in retelling the story of the victory at Sedan by depicting the French defeat. He therefore shifted the subject of the painting (at least from what it was in French versions), focusing on what happened at Sedan in the French camp on those first two days in September. For this reason, Napoleon III often appears at centre stage, but is always seen after the defeat. Camphausen's painting *Napoleon III. auf dem Schlachtfeld von Sedan* (Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum) dates from 1877. The emperor is on horseback, but immobile, a stooped, resigned figure who has

⁶² On Camphausen see Susanne Parth, *Zwischen Bildbericht und Bildpropaganda. Kriegskonstruktionen in der deutschen Militärmalerei des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Paderborn-Munich: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2010), p. 91ss.



clearly realized that defeat is now inevitable. And he is alone in the face of this tragedy; his followers are some distance away in the background, while next to the horse in the foreground are just two dead and one badly wounded soldier, and some abandoned rifles. Above Napoleon, high in the sky and clearly visible against the background of smoke from the fires, vultures circle.

This narrative was continued, as Camphausen also documented Napoleon's subsequent movements. In the same year, 1877, he painted *Napoleon III. und Bismarck auf dem Weg zu Wilhelm I. am Morgen nach der Schlacht von Sedan* (Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum). Bismarck, together with a picket of cuirassiers, is riding towards the carriage where Napoleon is seated; although he is now a prisoner, he receives all due honours. The French emperor is on his way to a meeting with the king of Prussia, an event which Camphausen depicted in another painting of 1878.

Hüntten enjoyed his greatest success with a painting of 1877 that depicts the clash between the cavalry at the Battle of Wörth (*Kampf mit französischer Reiterei bei Elsaßhausen während der Schlacht bei Wörth*), immediately acquired by the *Nationalgalerie* in Berlin (but which was destroyed during the bombing raids of 1945).⁶³ This large format (183 x 380) is so full of people and action that the whole landscape appears to be telling a story. A diagonal line cuts across the whole painting, dividing the French and the Prussian camps. In turn, the French part is divided into four parallel sections along which the cavalry is lined up and engaged in attacking the enemy. There is thus a kind of “avalanche” effect due to the build up of successive cavalry charges which, one after the other, are coming up the hill towards the German position. This is a dangerous situation for the Germans and in fact, on the left, a squadron of French cuirassiers have broken through the line and into the German camp in the foreground. Here, along the whole line of the diagonal, are scenes of the wounded and the dying. But the German troops do not retreat and respond to the enemy fire with steadiness, following the example of their com-

⁶³ Barbara Paul, “*Preußens Gloria*”. *Deutsche Geschichte in der Nationalgalerie zu Berlin*, in *Bilder der Macht - Macht der Bilder*, cit., p. 554s.



mander who, firm on his horse with sword unsheathed, exposes himself to danger and orders the counter-attack. In fact the Germans prevailed only towards the end of the battle of August 6th 1870, despite the fact that French cavalry had been at a particular disadvantage having had to deal with the uphill slope.

The youngest of the painters linked to the Düsseldorf School was Theodor Rocholl,⁶⁴ who died in 1933, and had first-hand experience of military action in the Greco-Turkish War of 1897 and in one of the “punitive expeditions” following the so-called Boxer Rebellion in China. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, however, Rocholl dedicated various canvases to the events of 1870-71 and to the Battle of Vionville of August 16th 1870 in particular. The most famous of these is *Der Kampf um die Standarte* of 1891 (Düsseldorf, Kunstmuseum), which focuses solely on the clash between two enemy squadrons of cavalry for the conquest of a standard.⁶⁵

Georg Bleibtreu⁶⁶ is another painter who initially established himself with various paintings depicting the war with Denmark and the Austro-Prussian War of 1866. Of particular note is the work acquired by the *Nationalgalerie* of Berlin in 1869, *Schlacht bei Königgrätz*, which depicts the decisive battle of July 3rd 1866.

The composition owes much to the classic view seen in the aforementioned *Feldherrnbügel*: Wilhelm I observes and directs the battle from the high ground while the decisive action in the Prussians’ favour is taking place below. For the Franco-Prussian War, Bleibtreu opts for a more choral approach to the narrative, that is, he focuses on collective action in which solid groups of ordinary soldiers face the enemy with unstinting courage. A clear example of this is the 1880 painting depicting the Württemberg troops engaged in the Battle of Wörth (*Die Württemberger in der Schlacht bei Wörth*, Stuttgart,

⁶⁴ Susanne Parth, *Zwischen Bildbericht und Bildpropaganda. Kriegskonstruktionen in der deutschen Militärmalerei des 19. Jahrhunderts*, cit., p. 136ss.

⁶⁵ *Angesichts der Ereignisse. Facetten der Historienmalerei zwischen 1800 und 1900. Aus dem Bestand des Kunstmuseums Düsseldorf im Ehrenhof* (Cologne-Weimar: Böhlau, 1999), edited by Martina Sitt, p. 56.

⁶⁶ Susanne Parth, *Zwischen Bildbericht und Bildpropaganda. Kriegskonstruktionen in der deutschen Militärmalerei des 19. Jahrhunderts*, cit., p. 96ss.



Staatsgalerie). There is again the figure of the commander on horseback, but he is surrounded and almost swamped by the mass of infantry soldiers who have shored up the lines after an enemy incursion and are now going on the counter-attack.

This aspect gives us a clear indication of one of the characteristics of German painting which corresponds to a further, higher level of representing the war, which Frank Becker has so rightly emphasized. Rather than concentrating on the actions of individuals, it is important to accentuate the unity of the soldiers from the various German states, because a celebration of collective heroism is also a celebration of a nation which has finally been united.

Die geballte Kraft, die eine Einheit entfalten kann, die alle einzelnen Aktionen konsequent aufeinander abstimmt, interessiert die deutschen Schlachtenmaler weitaus mehr als der Alleingang eines Individuums, der zwar theatralischer in Szene gesetzt sein mag, aber niemals eine ähnliche Wirkung erzielt.⁶⁷

This reading of the war is diametrically opposed to that adopted in French painting. The French tend to balance the general scale of the defeat of the army, and of the nation as a whole, with a celebration of individual episodes of resistance and heroism. On the contrary, the Germans tend to highlight the unity and solidarity of the troops who were from all the German states. The most important thing for them is brotherhood in arms as this is the proof and the guarantee of a long awaited national unity. Just four years earlier, in 1866, Bavarians and Saxons had fought with Austria against Prussia. Now the great momentous turning point, the common struggle with France is of far greater importance than any individual act of heroism.

This theme is also apparent in the paintings that were discussed above. In Bleibtreu's painting depicting the Württemberg regiment, Prussian foot soldiers (in the foreground) who are clearly recognizable by their spiked helmets, also take part. In the painting by Hün-

⁶⁷ Frank Becker, *Bilder von Krieg und Nation*, cit., p. 435.



ten, among the first units awaiting the French cavalry attack in solid formation are the “hunters of Württemberg”, the infantry battalions which fought the Third Army under the command of the Prussian Crown Prince.⁶⁸

We can, however, cite even more obvious examples of this tendency to privilege collective action and the brotherhood in arms. There was, in fact, another member of the Düsseldorf School who exalted the common aim of the German armies, presented as the expression of a single *Volksseele* that had finally achieved unity. Louis Kolitz, who was also one of the youngest painters (he died in 1914), painted *Am Abend von Gravelotte* depicting the battle of August 16th 1870 (Rastatt, Wehrgeschichtliches Museum). This is a truly unique battle painting, simply because there is no battle. The only evidence of conflict is a wounded man on the right-hand side and a column of smoke that is so distant that it melds with the horizon. There are no troops, there is no fighting and there is not even an enemy in sight. Neither are the German soldiers shown in a warrior-like poses. In fact they are kneeling: a whole battalion rapt in thought, praying. These soldiers are infantrymen from Pomerania, awaiting orders to go into battle while their commanders are agreeing on the details of the attack.

Contemporary viewers knew that this would be the decisive encounter, not only for that battle, but in order to halt Bazaine’s entire French army, which was, in fact, later surrounded and besieged at Metz. There is, moreover, an inversion of hierarchy. While Wilhelm I and Moltke occupy the centre of the painting, they are decidedly further away compared to the troops; here the supreme commander does not dominate the scene. The viewers’ attention is drawn to the mass of soldiers, in formation in several parallel rows who, in their disciplined wait for orders, show that they are ready for the sacrifice. The relationship between the king of Prussia and the infantrymen of Pomerania is of great intensity, the expression of a common will. This is not merely imposed from above; it takes on an

⁶⁸ On the troops allied with Prussia, and in particular those of Württemberg, see Michael Solka, *German Armies 1870-71* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2005), vol. 2: *Prussia’s Allies*, p. 40ss.



almost sacred significance because it already conveys the will of a whole nation united in the new Reich:

Wichtigster Akteur auf dem Gemälde sind die knienden Pommern, die sich so eng zusammengerottet haben, daß sie in der Abenddämmerung fast zu einem einzigen Körper verschmolzen zu sein scheinen – Sinnbild für ihre kompakte Kraft, aber auch für den einen Willen, der alle beseelt und der sie in dem entscheidenden Augenblick dazu befähigt, ihren Kampfgeist so lange zu zügeln, bis sie ihn wirklich sinnvoll einbringen können.⁶⁹

A similar vision dominates the 1898 painting by Carl Röchling, Werner's pupil, which also depicts the battle of August 16th (Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum). The fact that it is entitled *Tod des Majors von Halden bei Gravelotte* leads one to expect that it should depict the heroic death of a Prussian officer. But just as the battle is missing in Kolitz's painting, a death is not seen in Röchling's painting. The 1898 viewer would realize that the major is about to be hit, even though in the painting von Halden is still running forward with his sword unsheathed. And once again, despite the title, the real centre stage is occupied by the serried ranks of the battalion advancing under a hail of enemy fire. This is also the moment of truth for the Prussian infantry: they have already fixed their bayonets and are about to make direct contact with the enemy, once, that is, they have climbed over the bodies of their fallen fellow soldiers.

This unusual and extremely explicit depiction of the relationship of trust between officers and soldiers that transcends rank corresponds to the requirements of the *Auftragstaktik* adopted by the German troops on the orders of Moltke, who in turn, had been influenced by von Clausewitz. Once strategic and operational policy had been fixed, the units in the field enjoyed a remarkable degree of independent action on a tactical level, far more than the armies of other nations. But here too, there is a *superior sensus* involved in how the painters interpreted the conflict, and above all, in how it was re-

⁶⁹ Frank Becker, *Bilder von Krieg und Nation*, cit., p. 435.



ceived by the public. The single, ideal reference is to national unity, moulded by Bismarck and based on the convergence of a traditional élite and the new middle classes, aristocratic officers and troops, the ancient Prussian dynasty and more recent neo-liberal attitudes. All of these united in the building of the new Reich:

Auch im Bereich der Ikonographie des Krieges wurden also Vermittlungsstrategien zwischen konservativen und liberal-nationalen Leitideen entwickelt und bereitgestellt – ein Umstand, der sicherlich ebenfalls dazu beitrug, daß die Schlachtenmalerei der Einigungskriege so einträchtig in beiden Milieus rezipiert wurde, also sowohl beim aristokratischen wie auch beim bürgerlichen Publikum Anklang finden konnte. Die ständige Verquickung des feudalen mit dem nationalen Pathos gehört zu den wichtigsten Charakteristika der Schlachtenbilder der Einigungskriege.⁷⁰

We have said that the fundamental distinction between the ways French and German military painters depict this war is the contrast between individual episodes of heroism, favoured by the French, and the brotherhood in arms approach emphasized by the Germans. Yet there is at least one painting that is as important as it is well known in its departure from the usual scheme of things. The painter is Louis Braun, whose panoramic composition was mentioned earlier. The painting, which was completed in 1905, depicts the Battle of Stürzelbronn (*Gefecht bei Stürzelbronn*) on August 1st 1870 (Ingolstadt, Bayerisches Armeemuseum).

Essentially, Braun is again celebrating brotherhood in arms, but this time it is through an individual episode. There is a reason for his unusual composition; this would have been clear to the contemporary viewer who would have understood the historical significance of the scene immediately. Nowadays, however, a certain reconstruction of the historical context is necessary.

There are only a few human figures in Braun's painting. In the centre foreground is the (classic) scene of the horse galloping to-

⁷⁰ Frank Becker, *Bilder von Krieg und Nation*, cit., p. 443s.



wards the viewer. There is an interesting detail, however, as there are two soldiers on the horse. A little further behind there are two more cavalymen riding in the same direction, looking back at the enemy, with one of the two shooting at the French soldiers in pursuit. Only a fallen horse can be seen in the background, while even further in the background one can just make out the tiny figures of French soldiers firing at the fugitives. The only figures clearly distinguishable are therefore the four German cavalymen, identifiable thanks to their uniforms. Three are from the Bavarian light cavalry, wearing their typical helmets with the characteristic thick woollen crest (*Raupenhelme*) in place of the metal spike. Two of the three are looking back, and they are riding their own horses. The third is also Bavarian, but he is riding a horse which is also carrying another cavalryman, a Prussian hussar. Clearly, the fallen horse that can be seen in the background belonged to the Prussian; he had been knocked from his saddle following a clash with the enemy and the Bavarian rider had pulled him up onto his own horse.

This interpretation is confirmed by contemporary reports and by the official history of the fifth Bavarian *Cheveaulegers* regiment, the very unit that commissioned Braun's painting in 1905. The so-called "Battle of Stürzelbronn" was, in truth, a brief skirmish which only involved two squadrons of light cavalry (one Bavarian and one Prussian) who had entered the area bordering on Lorraine, but had no plans to engage the enemy. They just had to patrol the area, checking if the French, as General Staff feared, were getting ready to cross the border into Germany. When they came across the French camp, there was a short exchange of fire and the Germans retreated immediately. One hussar, however, was thrown from his saddle, falling under his wounded horse. And this is when the key episode depicted in the painting occurred: in the face of enemy fire, a Bavarian cavalryman returned and rescued his fellow Prussian soldier, escaping with him on horseback.

It was therefore a heroic act, but performed by an individual soldier, and thus not part of the usual pattern of German artists celebrating collective action. The historical, and, at the same time,



idealistic importance of this act derives from its links to the earlier 1866 war, which, positioned between 1864 war with Denmark and the 1870-71 war with France, was one of the conflicts which brought about German unification.⁷¹ The 1866 conflict was a fratricidal war between German states which contemporaries would remember all too well. With historical hindsight, the conflict of 1866 was above all a war between Prussia and Austria. From an Italian point of view it signified Custoza, Lissa and gaining the Veneto, but for Germans the general, and indeed dominant, view is that this was a war between the kingdom of Prussia and the multinational Habsburg empire, and was thus a deciding factor in German unification. After the Prussian victory in Bohemia on July 3rd 1866 at Königgrätz⁷² (Sadowa), Austria had no further say in the process of German unification which would be led by Bismarck with the Prussian dynasty at its heart.

An often overlooked part of this important conflict, however, was the all-German tragedy it entailed. This war, in fact, was what is defined as the *Deutscher Krieg* or the *Bruderkrieg*, that is, the “fratricidal war” between Germans on German soil. In fact the German states were divided between Austria and Prussia. There were 17 states on the Prussian side, including Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, Oldenburg, Mecklenburg-Schwerin and the Hanseatic cities of Hamburg, Bremen and Lübeck.⁷³ Allied to the Habsburg empire, on the other hand, were larger states, including Bavaria, Württemberg, Baden, Hanover and Saxony, alongside some of the smaller states including Hesse and the free city of Frankfurt. From the beginning of hostilities on June 16th 1866, the Prussian armies not only marched on Vienna, but also on these other states. By June 18th the Prussian troops and their allies had already invaded Saxony with the so-called Army of the Elbe, entering Leipzig and Dresden

⁷¹ For a comprehensive discussion of the path towards German unification from the point of view of armed conflict, see Dennis Showalter, *The Wars of German Unification* (London: Hodder, 2007), p. 123ss.

⁷² On this battle, see Gordon A. Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz: Prussia's Victory over Austria, 1866* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Philadelphia Press, 2003), p. 87ss.

⁷³ To be precise, it should be remembered that nine of these 17 German states went over to Prussia only after the Prussian victory at Sadowa.



and causing the Saxons to retreat towards Bohemia to meet up with the Austrians in preparation for a decisive battle.⁷⁴ The following day, the so-called Army of the Main occupied Hanover and proceeded south, taking Frankfurt on July 19th, Mainz on July 26th and Nuremberg on July 31st.⁷⁵

This was undoubtedly a less significant war in every sense due to its relatively minor strategic importance and the contained number of casualties on both sides. It was also a war that was decided in Bohemia and Austria, rather than in Saxony or Bavaria. After the battle of July 3rd in Bohemia, other events followed in quick succession: on July 19th the Prussians were at the gates of Vienna, but were then halted by the far-seeing diplomacy of Bismarck. The Chancellor, in fact, managed to curb Wilhelm I's desire to enter in the city triumph, realizing that it was best not to humiliate today's enemies as they could well become tomorrow's allies.⁷⁶ This was therefore followed by the armistice of Nikolsburg on July 26th in which Prussia gave up any territorial claims on Austria.

This war on German soil was, however, an open wound for those on the losing side. There was the trauma of the Prussian invasion and an occupation that the Prussian military leaders pursued with extreme severity: within 24 hours, Frankfurt had to pay 6,000,000 guilders and in all, the defeated had to pay war reparations to a total of 48,000,000 thalers. There were also the lands annexed: Prussia took the Electorate of Hesse (*Kurbessen*), the kingdom of Hanover and the city of Frankfurt.

All of this was accompanied by the humiliation suffered on the battlefield. Of all the troops on German soil, there were over twice the number of imperial Hapsburg forces compared to the Prussian

⁷⁴ On the movements of the Army of the Elbe, see Geoffrey Wawro, *The Austro-Prussian War. Austria's War with Prussia and Italy in 1866* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), p. 75ss.

⁷⁵ On the movements of the Army of the Main, see Klaus Müller, *1866: Bismarck's deutscher Bruderkrieg. Königgrätz und die Schlachten auf deutschem Boden* (Graz: Ares Verlag, 2007), p. 79ss.

⁷⁶ Lothar Höbelt, "Revanche pour Sadowa"? Österreich und der Deutsch-Französische Krieg, in *Der Deutsch-Französische Krieg 1870/71*, cit., p. 178ss.



troops (approximately 120,000 compared to about 50,000). And yet for Austria and her allies the conflicts were either a series of defeats on the battlefield, various retreats to avoid engagement or simply running away from the enemy. The troops of the kingdom of Hanover abandoned Göttingen without a fight, and then, after a promising start, surrendered once they had been completely surrounded at the Battle of Langensalza (situated about half way between Göttingen and Jena) on June 27th.⁷⁷ The troops of the Prince Elector of Hesse behaved in similar fashion, having already retreated to Kassel on June 16th before the Prussians had arrived. The Saxons, as mentioned above, had retreated southwards with the aim (or on the pretext) of reaching the Austrians in Bohemia, thus allowing the Prussians to march in without a fight.

When the war arrived in Bavaria, the Württemberg infantry avoided taking part in the Battle of Aschaffenburg of July 14th, which also saw the surrender of the Italian soldiers who had formed part of the Hapsburg forces.⁷⁸ The result was even more disastrous for the Bavarians, from the early clashes on July 4th when their cuirassiers fled from the Prussian artillery, to July 31st when their soldiers abandoned Würzburg, allowing the Prussians free access to the city.⁷⁹

Only with these events in mind can we understand how important Braun's painting was to contemporary viewers. The memory of 1866 had direct links with the celebration of the episode at Sturzelbronn of 1870, despite its scarce military importance. The tale of the Bavarian soldier saving his Prussian counterpart spread quickly: it was mentioned in official reports, taken up by the press, and became the subject of drawings and even postcards. The brave Bavarian became famous and was the first soldier to receive the Iron Cross (albeit Second Class) in 1870. This heightened interest occurred not only because it was one of the very first episodes of the war – the first “real” battles were not until after August 4th – but because it was magnified by the media to appeal to public opinion in the two German kingdoms in question. For the Prussians it was the first definite sign that

⁷⁷ *Ivi*, p. 54ss.

⁷⁸ *Ivi*, p. 112.

⁷⁹ *Ivi*, p. 85ss. and p. 141.



the wounds of 1866 could be healed in the name of a brotherhood in arms against the common enemy, and that a mere four years after the 1866 war there was a positive feeling towards unification under Prussian leadership.⁸⁰ For the Bavarians, this soldier of the light cavalry (who was called Hermann Weinacht, a tailor by profession who later emigrated to Canada) became the symbol of a rediscovered military honour. The cavalry did not flee as it had in 1866 and even intervened to save a Prussian soldier, that is, someone from the army that had invaded Bavaria four years previously.

Up until the end of the century, Braun successfully continued his career as a “Schlachtenmaler”, and continued to emphasize the role played by the Bavarian soldiers, also in his large cycle of frescos for the *Café Luitpold* in Munich for which he was well-remunerated.⁸¹ By the time the First World War broke out, Braun, who died in 1916, had been forgotten. Yet the theme of that very painting was taken up, celebrated and transformed in 1914. This occurred on such a scale that the image became an essential part of the collective sense of belonging and inspired both literary works and the figurative arts with an enthusiasm for the outbreak of the war (*Augusterlebnis*) and the new brotherhood in arms of the trenches (*Schützengrabengemeinschaft*).⁸²

Verdun eventually replaced Sedan as the main “place of memory” in the Franco-German / European tragedy, but the victors were to change places. Germany was defeated and France imposed its conditions at the Peace Conference in Versailles. This started on January 18th 1919 in the same Hall of Mirrors where, on January 18th 1871, the king of Prussia had been acclaimed the first emperor of the new Reich by the victorious German troops of Sedan.

⁸⁰ On the fears that circulated at the beginning of the war, and were then replaced by enthusiasm after the victory at Sedan, see Alexander Seyferth, *Die Heimatfront 1870/71. Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft im deutsch-französischen Krieg* (Paderborn-Munich: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2007), p. 31ss. and p. 44ss.

⁸¹ Susanne Parth, *Zwischen Bildbericht und Bildpropaganda. Kriegskonstruktionen in der deutschen Militärmalerei des 19. Jahrhunderts*, cit., p. 353s.

⁸² Aribert Reimann, *Der große Krieg der Sprachen. Untersuchungen zur historischen Semantik in Deutschland und England zur Zeit des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2000), p. 179.



With Verdun, the 1914 conflict became the “Great War” and the “storm of steel” prevailed over acts of individual heroism which had been celebrated in the art of 1870. New concepts of military origins became part of the collective consciousness, also because they were reformulated and turned into myth by literature, from “Materi-alschlacht” to “Menschenmaterial”, a term which marked the culmination of a reversal of values: from a war of destruction to the destruction of humanity.

On the western front much was new and painting reflected this great change. There were no longer the lightning charges of the cavalry and the splendid uniforms of the cuirassiers, the uhlans and the hussars. Now there were the sombre tones and lunar landscapes of Otto Dix, depicting the craters which the “cavemen of the trenches” inhabited for years. And the German and French dead, the heirs to that generation that had experienced the heroism of the glorious defeat and the pride in the legitimate victory, became the lost generation, unnamed in the collective, and intentionally anonymous, memory of the unknown soldier.