

Anti-French Resentment in the Occupied Rhineland (Retrospective Account, 1990)

Abstract

Otto Schumacher-Hellmold (1912-2006) wrote about politics for various West German newspapers and was a co-founder of the liberal-democratic centrist party, which eventually became the FDP, which he later represented as a local politician and mayor of the city of Bonn. Like most of the Rhineland, Bonn had been under French occupation since the end of the First World War. In this excerpt, Schumacher-Hellmold recalls the resentment of the Bonn population towards the French soldiers, as well as the small acts of revenge perpetrated by citizens, including himself and his classmates, against the members of the occupation forces and their children. The interwar period was characterized by anti-French propaganda, as France was considered primarily responsible for the harsh terms of the Versailles Treaty.

Source

[...]

Major and minor disputes and friction were therefore the order of the day. It was said, for example, that a high school senior from the foothills did not get out of the way of an officer quickly enough before the “vintage” and was beaten by him with his “little stick.” The “country boy” immediately gave the “arrogant fella” a good slap in the face. The officer’s cap turned somersaults on the sidewalk, accompanied by the derisive and gleeful laughter of numerous students. On another occasion, students from the grammar school had thrown stones from the schoolyard at officers and horses galloping past on the bridle path along the Rhine, causing the horses to rear up and bolt.

Such and similar incidents, in which the perpetrator or perpetrators could not be identified immediately, repeatedly led to the arrest of the principal. On several occasions, all students or those of the age group in question had to line up for questioning in the schoolyard. As the perpetrator usually did not come forward, the French carried out “face checks” – with little success, of course.

The children of the occupying families usually started school at the same time as the Germans. They often encountered us in large groups on the sidewalk of the Belderberg just before the Koblenz Gate, guarded in front and behind by “Poilus” with rifles. If we didn’t get off the sidewalk quickly enough, we were shooed out into the street or pushed against the walls of houses. In such cases, if my comrades and I tried to walk “normally” past walls and shop windows, we were sure to be pushed and hit in the neck by the guards.

The next winter came. Beyond the Koblenz Gate, in the Hofgarten, a wonderful snowy landscape arose. We had a snowball fight there after school, which we continued with the French students when they turned up. And then we each grabbed a young Frenchman with one arm, pushed his head down and used our free hand to “wash” him with snow. This had to be done within a few seconds, because the guards ran up at the cries for help from the “washed.” We immediately threw our satchels to our comrades who were not involved in the scuffle and sprinted towards Stockentor/Markt, knowing full well that the soldiers with their long coats and rifles would have a hard time following us athletically trained boys.

The Stadtgarten bordered the Alte Zoll and was opposite the Hofgarten, barely thirty meters from the Koblenz Gate. It was home to a French police station, guarded by a sentry with a side gun mounted, with

a blue and white striped guardhouse to the side. And everything was covered in snow. We had quickly produced a whole “arsenal” of snowballs the size of a rounders ball and stacked them around the bases of the columns of the Koblenz Gate, and most of us were good rounders players, practiced at hitting our opponents from long distances.

“Go!” was the order of the day. The projectiles were “fired” across the street at the guard post! Some missed the target, but many did not. The bombardment quickly created a “snowman” who retreated into the guardhouse to avoid our well-aimed balls.

Once the “ammunition” was spent, we ran through the gate towards the bridge, right over the part of the Belderberg where we had so often been chased off the sidewalk during encounters with the French schoolchildren.

Before the parades on the market square, the strongest attraction for Bonn’s citizens was the annual horse show of the French in the Hofgarten. Thousands watched the rides over the moat, low and high oxers. The main focus was on the “Wall,” which was set up on the west side of the square near the “Academic Art Museum.” It was not uncommon for horses to refuse to jump or fail to clear the obstacle. The uniformed riders in their neat uniforms landed on the grass or sandy embankment, and their high-brimmed officers’ caps, richly decorated with braids, rolled through the terrain. All around, the Germans took undisguised glee, accompanied by applause: “That won’t do them any harm!”

[...]

Source of original German text: Otto Schumacher-Hellmond, „Prügelstrafe für Separatisten. Puck, die Patrioten und die ‚Poilus‘ – Bonn zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen“, in *Alltag in der Weimarer Republik: Erinnerungen an eine unruhige Zeit*, ed. Rudolf Pörtner. Düsseldorf: ECON Verlag, 1990, pp. 385–87.

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