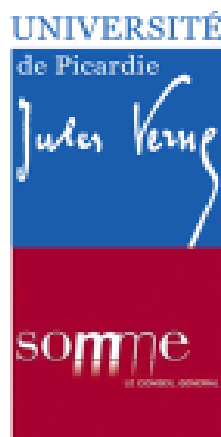




FACING DEFEAT (1870-1945) SEVENTY FIVE YEARS OF FRANCO- GERMAN HISTORY

Château de Vincennes, Paris

March 8th-9th 2021



The year 2020-2021 is marked by a quadruple Franco-German anniversary: it is preceded by the sesquicentenary of the beginnings of the Franco-Prussian War and followed by the seventy second anniversary of the ending of the Second World War. Between the two, the centenary of the effectuation of the Versailles treaty – which, at the outcome of the war, was intended to reshape the relations between the two neighbouring countries, ideally enabling the avoidance of new conflicts – also takes place during 2020, as well as the eightieth anniversary of the French defeat of May-June 1940. For the French and German people, defeat consists, then, of a *shared experience*. It has profoundly affected, disrupted and rearranged French and German societies, before, during and after conflicts.

In this fragmented commemorative cycle, in which every conflict is most often studied separately, the *Service Historique de la Défense* (Vincennes), in partnership with the *Centre Marc Bloch* (Berlin), the *Centre d'Histoire 'Espaces et Cultures'* at Auvergne University (Clermont-Ferrand), the *Centre international de Recherche de l'Historial de la Grande Guerre*, the University of Picardie – Jules Verne (Péronne), the *Institut Historique Allemand* (Paris) and the *Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr* (Potsdam) wish to organise a scientific conference that will interrogate the unity of the events marked by the period from a Franco-German perspective, by focusing on the shared experience of defeat. The symposium will take place on the 8th and 9th March 2021 at the Château de Vincennes, Paris.

Recent work has shown that the history of the years 1870-1945 cannot be reduced to that of conflicts, defeats and revenge.¹ For their contemporaries, war and defeat represent no less a horizon of possibilities and at times, a lived experience. They are forced to cope with war, whether it is in order to prepare for it, adapt to it as it unfolds, or withstand and invoke it once over. From this perspective, two prevalent options, not always exclusive of one another, consist of either taking revenge or overcoming the logic of confrontation. In a Franco-German framework, this symposium will therefore provide an opportunity to explore the diverse attitudes of civilian as well as military actors facing defeat, both their own and that of others, between 1870 and 1945. This involves grasping the relationship with the violence of defeat on an individual, intimate scale, as well as on that of military and non-military, local, national and imperial institutions, while remaining attentive to the interactions between these dimensions.

Furthermore, the recurrence of endured and inflicted defeats from 1870 to 1945 permits addressing the ways in which the experience of one conflict is introduced into the next, whether consciously or not. Do social actors invent a 'culture of defeat', to take up the expression coined by Wolfgang Schivelbusch, or on the contrary, do they live the experience of succumbing to defeat as an exceptional moment in their lives, or as an *initiation* that provides meaning for that which preceded this event and/or for their future existence?²

¹ Julien Élise, König Mareike, *Rivalités et interdépendances 1870-1918*, (Histoire franco-allemande vol. 7) Villeneuve d'Ascq, PU du Septentrion, 2018 ; Guieu Jean-Michel, *Gagner la paix, 1914-1929*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2015.

² Schivelbusch Wolfgang, *Die Kultur der Niederlage. Der amerikanische Süden 1865, Frankreich 1871, Deutschland 1918*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 2007 (1st ed. 2001).

We add in conclusion that the period between 1870 and 1945 saw the European powers extend into other continents, and then the systems of colonial domination go into crisis. Military defeats upon European soil rapidly acquired a global dimension, and the colonised population concretely experienced the imperial restructuring provoked by these.

Four main general thematic sections are proposed:

Envisaging Defeat

At the outset of a conflict, defeat is rarely imagined. Victory, on the other hand, is often anticipated, in particular by reflecting upon the goals of the war. For France in 1870-71 and 1940, for Germany in 1918 and 1945, facing defeat is first and foremost the obligation of dealing with the *unexpected outcome* of war in the proper sense of the term, an unimaginable and unimagined end. During conflicts, the anticipation of the future is usually a way to reassure oneself, by projecting oneself into victorious resolutions of the war. Can defeat be similarly envisaged before and during the conflict?

Taking form more or less rapidly, defeat radically calls into question the expectations of various actors. How do combatants and non-combatants deal with this event? How do they anticipate it? How do they take stock of it and react to it during the three wars?

Most often, defeat supplies a surprising and improvised turn to a more or less anticipated face-off with the enemy. It leads both civilian and military actors to adapt to unexpected dangers and unforeseen combat zones.

The magnitude of the setbacks suffered and the collapse of institutions on the brink of defeat can provide an opportunity for local communities to assert themselves through community management but also, at times, through the conduction of operations, whether at the bidding of the central government, the enemy, or on their own initiative.

It can also generate, in conjunction with the delegitimization of civilian and military authorities at the very heart of hostilities, expressions of rejection of wartime violence – sometimes stigmatized by the term *defeatism* – or even lead to the rebuilding of social and political structures under pressure from the enemy in order to avoid defeat. The calling into question of institutions, both civilian and military, can thus be seen as an opportunity to overthrow an established order and clear the way for regime changes and *revolutionary or counter-revolutionary cycles* or moments, either engineered in advance or transpiring during the very temporality of defeat.

Experiencing Defeat

The second research section will be consecrated to the final moments of conflict, in which defeat is *consumed*. How have individuals (combatants and non-combatants, men, women and children), social groups and institutions between 1870 and 1945 coped – or not – with the *experience of collapse* that defeat represents? Military cadres and groups were shaken, or indeed fractured, by the blow of defeat. The legitimacy and competence of the commanding forces are thus called into question, even as the urgency of the situation leads the military authorities to question the operations they are still able to carry out (retreat, counter-attack, siege warfare, etc.). At the same time, maintaining the discipline and cohesion of a defeated troop becomes a challenge for which both officers and non-commissioned officers were neither trained nor prepared.

The *emotions accompanying defeat* (frustration, depression and trauma, leading at times to suicide, refusal, denial, but also relief, feelings of liberation or even joy...) in the framework of a history of sensibilities, may, for example, be explored within this section.

The link between the nature and length of hostilities and the experience of defeat will also be reflected upon. Did the radicalization of violence during the period between 1870 and 1945, and the accompanying process of totalization, have implications for the ways in which successive defeats were experienced? Does a total war imply total defeat?

Finally, the temporality of the *moment of defeat* will be problematised. When does the *experience of defeat* begin and when does it end? Do societies and individuals experience defeat over short or extended periods of time? How do social actors consider themselves *in defeat*, in relation to ultimately longer periods of appeasement and peace? Is the duration of defeat experienced as a parenthesis?

Which leads us to the third section of the symposium,

Acting Defeat

Who bears the task of acknowledging and proclaiming defeat? This thematic section considers the speeches and representations used to explain and gain acceptance of defeat both on the front line and at the rear. Questions such as access to information (intelligence, propaganda, rumours, etc.), and the immediate reaction of social actors to news of defeat (revolt, relief, etc.) are raised.

Defining the extent of defeat is a matter, then, of negotiation. It concerns, first of all, debating the terms of the defeat (withdrawal, truce, ceasefire, surrender, armistice, etc.) with the enemy and within one's own camp. Particular attention must therefore be accorded to the actors who organise the economic, diplomatic and military management of the defeat, and to the implications of these negotiations (occupation, return of prisoners, disarmament of combatants, provisioning, public order, tribute and compensation payments, drawing of new borders, etc.).

Even as these actions are set in motion, individual or collective phenomena of rejecting defeat appear. The fact that some decide to continue fighting against all odds throws into question the means of coercion and the legitimacy of the institutions that instate defeat. These refusals invite us to question the imaginary warriors, the political discourse and the combat practices of those who refuse to demobilise.

Learning from Defeat

Since cooperating with the enemy is often considered as treason, and hence politically and morally disqualified, it is not self-evident. Nevertheless, once defeat is sealed, peace lies once again on the horizon for the social actors. While nationalist regimes conserve the belligerent wartime rhetoric, some actors work to shift society beyond the status of victors and vanquished. Special attention will therefore be dedicated to individuals or groups who work towards mediation between yesterday's adversaries. While these may be guided by wishes of reconciliation with the Other, they might also result from internal political or ideological logic (the overpowered country seeking the support of the victor to overcome social tensions, or even civil wars, that break out in the aftermath of defeat).

Finally, we are interested in the interpretations, re-interpretations and lessons that result from these experiences. Does defeat become for its contemporaries a key to reading the past? Do they consider it as collective punishment, merited or not, or as instrumented by providence, a *fatum*, an accident, or perhaps the evildoing of a minority? In this context, we are especially interested in *writing defeat*. That is, in analyses and testimonies which, sometimes in the midst of the experience, as in Marc Bloch's *Strange Defeat* – "this verbal trial of the year 1940" –

written between July and September of that year, sometimes from a distance, try to infuse meaning into the event beyond the *astonishment* it provokes.

Which lessons do contemporaries of the defeat retain, and which reforms do they conceive of in order to avoid reliving the experience? Examining societies from within, we will focus on the impact on both victorious and defeated military organizations (recruitment, conscription, military alliances, colonial and imperial expansion, doctrines, training, discipline and traditions).

While the feeling of revenge following defeat is significant, it must be weighed against the hopes and experiences of appeasement and cooperation. The final section will be devoted more particularly to a different account of the chronological period. How do the experiences and representations of defeat, one's own and that of the Other, affect the *experiences of cooperation* during intervals between conflicts, and the attempts to achieve sustainable peace that have been implemented during the period, even if the latter do not prove to be fruitful enough?

From this perspective, facing the enemy – whether vanquished or victor – means, for French and Germans between 1870 and 1945, not only affronting and humiliating but also negotiating, reconciling and overcoming hostile representation of one another. Such an approach is the result of decisions taken by public authorities as well as individual and collective initiatives. At times, it even involves cooperating with yesterday's enemies in international forums that emerge from treaties (such as the International Red Cross or the League of Nations), finding compromises and fighting side by side in coalitions to manage crises in the name of more or less shared interests.

Nature of the Desired Contributions

Candidates must ensure that their propositions correspond to the general reflection outlined above, the selected period and the described thematic research sections. If they wish, they may indicate in which of the sections they would like to make their contribution, knowing that the organising committee will ultimately inform them, if they are selected, of the place they will occupy at the symposium.

The organizing committee and the scientific council of the symposium would like to emphasise that the Franco-German field of study has, over the last forty years, become a pioneering field of non-national approaches, by proposing comparisons, the study of cultural transfers; an intersected, connected history. Therefore, without excluding proposals devoted to only one of the two countries, they will favour papers dedicated to the study of an object in both countries. Comparisons with other countries or emblematic defeats are also welcome. Proposals that cover the entire period, such as those that attempt to compare diachronically several experiences of defeat, as well as those devoted to only one of the defeats are expected.

Proposals should be submitted in the form of a **one-page summary and a one-page curriculum vitae**. They must be emailed to the organizing committee at the following address: **fairefacedefaute.facingdefeat@gmail.com** by **October 15th 2020** at the latest.

Successful candidates will have 20 minutes at their disposal for their **presentations which will be held in English or in French**.

Depending on the evolution of the situation related to COVID-19, the organizing committee reserves the right to cancel the symposium or to allow certain speakers to present their papers by other means if they are unable to travel. If the symposium is cancelled, the organizing committee will do its utmost to eventually replace it with a publication. The selected speakers will be kept informed of the solutions envisaged and must also imperatively inform the organising committee before incurring any expenses related to the symposium.

A publication is planned following the conference, those selected for publication will be informed promptly and must submit their final paper **by August 31st 2021**.

Organizing Committee

Dr. Nicolas Beaupré (Université de Clermont-Auvergne, Centre d'Histoire Espaces et Culture, Centre International de Recherche de l'Historial de la Grande Guerre)
Dr. Géraud Létang (Service Historique de la Défense)
Lieutenant Aurélien Renaudière (Service Historique de la Défense)

Scientific Council

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Centre d'Histoire « Espaces et Cultures » de l'Université de Clermont-Auvergne - Clermont-Ferrand)
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Centre Marc Boch / Zentrum Marc Bloch (Berlin)
Historial de la Grande Guerre (Péronne et Thiepval)
Institut Historique Allemand (Paris)
Service Historique de la Défense (Vincennes)
Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr (Potsdam)