‘You do not become a European by choice but by necessity’: The Alsace border region and its opening up to Europe in the writings of Otto Flake, René Schickele and Hermann Wendel

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Abstract
The three writers Otto Flake, René Schickele and Hermann Wendel met in Straßburg in 1901. Together with other artists and writers they founded the group ‘Das jüngste Elsaß’ (also known as ‘Der Stürmerkreis’). One of the purposes of this artistic group was to shed the ‘hybrid state’ of Alsace as a border region and instead urge that Alsace take on a mediating role in a future united Europe. Their pacifist European approach, which they adhered to during World War I and later on in exile, originated from controversial debates emerging from the extreme tensions caused by German and French nationalism. The three writers viewed Alsace as a symbol of Europe. For their ‘border literature’ Europe offered the possibility of refraining from the concept of nationhood, which is based on homogeneity and therefore violent exclusion, something in which they did not find themselves represented.

Keywords
Alsace-Lorraine question, Alsatian literary history, border region, Franco-German relations, ‘The Good European’, ‘Das jüngste Elsaß’, transnationalism, United States of Europe

I
The three writers, Otto Flake (1880–1963), René Schickele (1883–1940) and Hermann Wendel (1884–1936), whose ‘writing Europe’ is the subject of this article, were all born in what was then known as the ‘Imperial Province of Alsace-Lorraine’ (‘Reichsland Elsaß-Lothringen’), which had been a part of Germany since 1871: Flake and Wendel
were both born in Metz and Schickele in Oberelnheim (today’s Obernai) not far from Straßburg (today’s Strasbourg). The three got to know each other in Straßburg in 1901. Here, together with other artists and writers including Ernst Stadler (1883–1914) and Salomon Grumbach (1884–1952), they founded the group ‘Das jüngste Elsaß’ and launched the literary journals Der Stürmer, which was subtitled ‘Halbmonatsschrift für künstlerische Renaissance im Elsass’ (‘Fortnightly Periodical for an Artistic Renaissance in Alsace’, not to be confused with the later Nazi publication of the same name), and Der Merker (see Martens, 1977; Parr, 1998). The name of the group recalled and built on early naturalism (‘Jüngstes Deutschland’), while the title of the journal Der Stürmer evoked memories of the ‘Sturm und Drang’ period, especially the time that Goethe had spent in Strasbourg.

The ‘youngest Alsatians’ differentiated themselves from the already existing groups that had been shaping the cultural life of the ‘Reichsland’ since the 1890s (see Gruber, 1905). First, there was the pro-German ‘Alsbund’,1 founded in 1893. Its journal was Erwinia and its ‘figurehead’ Friedrich Lienhard (1865–1929), who tried to establish connections to the hegemonic culture of Prussia. Then there was the Alsatian dialect theatre known as ‘Young Alsace’, founded in Straßburg in 1898 around the figures of Julius Greber (1868–1914) and Gustave Stoskopf (1869–1944), which advocated Alsatian independence and was characterized by a pro-French bias. Finally, a pro-French group gathered around the Revue alsacienne illustrée / Illustrierte elsässische Rundschau, also founded in 1898 by Charles Spindler (1865–1938) and Anselm Laugel (1851–1928). This periodical was initially neutral, but from 1900 on it was co-published by Pierre Bucher (1869–1921), who saw it as part of a French resistance movement. It was, moreover, supported by Maurice Barrès (1862–1923), a famous nationalist writer at the time (see his trilogy of novels, Les Bastions de l’est, 1905–13), as well as a notorious politician of the national right and member of the ‘Ligue des Patriotes’.

The objective pursued by the ‘Das Jüngste Elsaß’ group in publishing its journals and essays was to establish an ‘intellectual republic’ on the cultural ‘wasteland’ (Schickele, 1902a: 3) they deemed Alsace to be, together with Alsatians who – to quote from an article Schickele wrote for Der Stürmer – hated ‘Prussianness in art . . . as much as they did in everyday life’ (1902b: 90).2 The group wished to establish this ‘intellectual Alsatianness’, as Stadler would later (1983 [1913]) call it,3 as a ‘psychological term for the character of all the intellectual offspring nurtured by Gallic and German blood’, to quote the phrase used by Schickele in his ‘Jungelsässisches Programm’ (Schickele, 1904: 691).4 It was an issue that Flake, Schickele, Wendel and their associates would subsequently focus on and develop. The concept of ‘intellectual Alsatianness’ was not meant in any territorial sense. Rather, it was construed as an intellectual, ‘supra-Alsatian’ attitude, which was also open to non-Alsatians and, in the eyes of the group’s members, was embodied by the likes of Victor Hugo, Jean Jaurès or Romain Rolland. This attitude was supplemented by the concept of a supra-national ‘cultural Alsatianness’, which called for an exchange of French and German ideas, especially in the field of art (Prévôt, 1911: 107). It strove to overcome the ‘hybrid status’ of a border region and – as Dirk Forster underlines in his recollections of Ernst Stadler – to achieve a ‘new mediating role for Alsace in a future united Europe’ (Forster, 1967: 313). In numerous texts, the contributors to Der Stürmer attempted, as Flake wrote, to turn the ‘enforced nature of a border
region’ into an ‘advantage’ (1910: 154) – a kind of trans-national avant-garde.\(^5\) French national, German national and Alsatian autonomist literary movements were to be welded together in a supra-national synthesis (Schickele, 1906: 15).

Even before 1918, Europe had occasionally been used by this group for strategic purposes to similar ends. In 1906–7, for example, Schickele wrote a play entitled *Europa*, in which the United States of Europe were established along with a world parliament.\(^6\) Friedrich Nietzsche’s figure of ‘the good European’ appears in Schickele’s expressionist novel *Benkal, der Frauentrüster*, published by Paul Cassirer in 1913. The country in which Benkal performs his heroic deeds and which is engaged in permanent conflict with both its neighbours is called Mittelland and the inn where Benkal lives is known as ‘Zum kleinen Mittelländer’ (Schickele, 1959a: 11).\(^7\) On the one hand, this can be seen as a reference to Alsace. On the other hand, as Nietzsche writes in Part Eight of *Beyond Good and Evil*, the ‘natives of Mittelland’ are also ‘good Europeans’, that is to say, those who, to quote Nietzsche, ‘are too far-ranging to find satisfaction in any fatherlandishness’ (1999: 200).\(^8\)

II

The First World War marked a peak in the much-discussed and much-cited Alsatian rift between the two great powers Germany and France, and the ‘national moral conflict’ that accompanied it. As Schickele noted in his diary, the problem at the time was that ‘the existence of every honest Alsatian appeared questionable’ (1959d: 1104). In February 1915, Flake argued in the *Neue Rundschau* that Alsatians should not opt in favour of either Germany or France, but ‘for the truer mission . . . of understanding, of comparative and mutually stabilizing Europeanism’ (1915: 269).\(^9\) A year later, in 1916, S. Fischer published Flake’s novel *Horns Ring*, in which the protagonist searches for ‘wise, European-minded people’ and a ‘European spirit created from a Franco-German synthesis (1917: 193 and 243).\(^10\)

The ‘return’ of Alsace to France at the end of the First World War rendered the cultural goal pursued by Flake, Schickele and Wendel obsolete. For them the end of the war and the ‘loss of their homeland’ was a major break in their biographies. In an article entitled ‘Abschied vom Elsaß’, Flake wrote: ‘Thirty years were extinguished, a mere second of eternity and yet half a life, my life. How had I spent it? Pursuing a dream, a reality which plunged into the abyss of time’ (1919: 41).\(^11\) New or different goals were now needed if ‘extinction’ was to be avoided. While the First World War had bolstered the rationale behind the group’s literary activities and made writing all the more urgent in achieving a reconciliation between France and Germany, the end of the war and the reintegration of Alsace into France made it inevitable that the idea of a supra-national Alsace as a symbol for Europe would remain a utopia for the foreseeable future. The moving of the border from the Vosges Mountains to the River Rhine had a direct consequence for the members of the group: their equivocal pro-French stance before 1918 meant they could not remain in Alsace. The European dimension to their thoughts and writings had surfaced occasionally in the past, but now that Flake, Schickele and Wendel were in exile, so to speak, it came increasingly
to the fore. Flake articulated the dilemma and the change of direction confronting them in 1919 in the article ‘Abschied vom Elsaß’ cited above:

What options were left if we wished to save ourselves? Not France or Germany, but only the third option: the super-ordinate realm of the intellect, to which the last vestiges of pragmatism were denied . . . You do not become a European by choice but by necessity. (1919: 42)¹²

The election manifesto of intellectual Alsatians thus became the emergency programme of intellectual Europeans.

As was the case in the first texts Flake wrote around 1900, he returned to Nietzsche once again after the First World War – this time, like Schickele, to Nietzsche’s figure of the ‘good European’. In the early 1920s Flake detected a crisis of the European spirit. He wished to remedy this by means of a specifically German vision of Europe in which national unification interests would be interwoven with cosmopolitan objectives. In the Zwölf Chroniken Werrenwags, published in 1924 under the heading ‘Zum guten Europäer’ – which earned Flake the admiration and subsequent friendship of Klaus Mann among others – he wrote:

What we have in mind for the future is a Europe which, while making it possible to dispense with force as a means of its realization, nevertheless achieves the goal of German commonality. The form it takes can only be one which replaces force by freedom . . . This will lead to the reappearance of what has very little market value nowadays: the idea of a united Europe which has abolished borders, standing armies, national currencies, etc. (1959 [1924]: 75)¹³

Flake’s claim was that only five years after the First World War it would be too early to get rid of the national idea, even if one sought to achieve the ‘higher’ idea of the League of Nations. Therefore, Flake’s united Europe did not imply a neglect of the nation. Rather, it would be a matter of ‘uniting the national with the cosmopolitan’, not least because what Flake calls the ‘solely Germans’, the nationalists, were to be fought. The nation states would only be a first station on the way to the ‘cosmos of states’. This cosmos would only be possible as a federation of free states; and only as such would it represent ‘the highest idea, which is just as sovereign and given as egoism: the idea of justice, equality, peace, tolerance’ (Flake, 1959: 76–7).¹⁴ In his text ‘Vom kommenden Weltbild’, published in November 1923 in the Neue Rundschau and later added as the ‘Ninth Chronicle’ to the book edition of the Zwölf Chroniken Werrenwags, Flake is certain that one can ‘no longer think in German and no longer think in French or English’, but ‘only in a European synthetic way’ (1959: 88),¹⁵ because Europe, Flake is convinced, ‘is the spirit of tomorrow, whose traits are pushing their way into visibility in us’ (1959: 92).¹⁶

III

The figure of the ‘good European’ also played a role in Wendel’s writings. In the memoirs of his youth in Metz he noted in retrospect that his life in the city had opened ‘the doors to a fond appreciation of French civilization and history’ (1934: 74),¹⁷ as a result of which
Baudelaire now means almost as much to me as Heine, I enjoy Chamfort just like Lichtenberg, I derive more pleasure from Renoir than Thoma, I prefer Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac* to Uhland’s *Herzog Ernst von Schwaben*, and the Great Revolution is a new and stirring experience for me every day, whereas the Seven Years War shocks me no more than the Peloponnesian War. (Wendel, 1934: 74–5)

It is French history, above all the Revolution – and especially Napoleon, whose framed picture hung above Wendel’s bed (and stood on 2 December, the anniversary of Austerlitz, framed by two lighted candles, on the children’s table) – that laid ‘the foundations for a good European’ within Wendel at an early stage by developing ‘a fondness for the French character, without in any way denying my German nature’ (1934: 75).

Wendel had repeatedly addressed the issue of Franco-German relations as a journalist and socialist politician before 1914, becoming the youngest SPD member of the German Reichstag in 1912. In his essays and speeches, Wendel, like Flake, ascribed to France the function of a role model when it came to Franco-German relations, not least because he saw France as the mediator of democracy and civilization in Europe. From 1920 onwards, he reported for German newspapers on the movements for autonomy in Alsace, as well as on other political and economic problems in Alsace and Lorraine. He specifically mentioned revanchist German thinking, according to which Alsace-Lorraine was supposedly in need of salvation and constituted an obstacle on the path to a new Franco-German understanding. Like Flake and Schickele he was convinced that ‘the black, red and white flagpole’, in other words the German Reich, ‘had never taken root in Alsatian soil’, but had remained ‘a piece of dead wood’ (Wendel, 1927: 18). He then emphasized the ‘good European’, in particular in his two essays *Neues Deutschland, neues Europa* and *Der Rhein: Deutschlands oder Europas Strom?* In the first essay, written in 1921, Wendel placed his faith in the International Trade Union Confederation and ‘twenty-eight million organized workers’ as ‘the granite foundation on which to build the new Europe’ (1921: 14), calling for national disarmament and a complete renunciation of the use of force in order to drain ‘the bloody swamp that is Europe’ (1921: 16). The second speech, given several years before Lucien Febvre’s famous history of the Rhine, provides a historical outline of Franco-German rivalry over the river. Wendel argued in favour of the Rhine – like other inland waters – being ‘extricated from the national danger zone by means of joint administration’ (1927: 17), calling for it to be granted international status. He thus joined the ranks of Rudolf von Gottschall, August Stöber, Alphonse de Lamartine and Alfons Paquet, all of whom invoked the ‘Rhine as a nation breaker’ (Wendel, 1927: 21), seeing in it a European river whose ‘vocation’ was to bring the continent together. The Dutch, the Germans, the French, and the Swiss would thus be bonded together in a ‘partnership of convenience’ and their association would ‘give the new concept of Europe life and clarity’ (Wendel, 1927: 24).

After the First World War, Schickele likewise increasingly turned his attention to crafting a vision for Europe, returning to the thoughts he had had on the Alsace issue and repeatedly coming back to the Rhine. His ‘Blick vom Hartmannswillerkopf’, inspired by René Prévôt and published in 1922 in a volume of essays entitled *Wir wollen nicht sterben!*, earned him modest renown. This view from the Vosges mountains, an area fiercely contested in the First World War and which saw the deaths of tens of thousands of French and German soldiers, ‘inseparably entangled and piled on top of each other, layer by
layer’, as Schickele wrote (1932: 290), presents the ‘Vosges region’ and the ‘Black Forest region’ as if they were two pages of an open book – I saw clearly that the Rhine did not separate but united these regions by holding them tightly together with its firm fold. One of the two sides pointed eastwards and the other westwards; on each were written the first lines of a different but related song. (Schickele, 1959b: 532)

The Rhine is thus transformed from a border river into a book fold, whose glue seals the gap and the potential breach between the two sides and holds France and Germany firmly together in their related diversity (cf. Kraume, 2010: 214–29; 2011: 172–5). This cultural cohesion is a fundamental prerequisite for Schickele’s cultural policy objective of achieving a synthesis between Germany and France in a supra-national Europe, which he advocates in many texts and in which the two countries, as Schickele was to state later in his novel Blick auf die Vogesen, would build ‘Europe’s new monuments . . . as temples of our everlasting peace’ (1927: 433–4).

At least that was the utopian vision. In this vision, Schickele sees himself as a dwarf standing on the shoulders of giants, whereas the image is slightly modified in Schickele’s collection of essays Die Grenze (1932):

For my part, I, together with the French elite, am looking forward to a united Europe, of which the Franco-German alliance must and will be the centrepiece. En avant! We are preceded by geniuses like Victor Hugo and Jean Jaurès . . . So I will run after them like a little Alsatian altar boy and from time to time I will ring the bell a bit. (Schickele, 1959c: 614)

But in the ‘century of violence’, Schickele’s advocacy of a political community in which no one exercises power or uses violence had no chance of finding a wider hearing, just as the idea of a Europe uniting nations still had no chance in the first half of the century – the bell of the little Alsatian altar boy went unheard.

IV

The pacifist European stance adopted by Flake, Schickele and Wendel, to which they adhered even during the war and later on in exile, evolved in an environment of controversial and predominantly political debate arising from the extreme tension caused by German and French nationalism. In this situation, the three writers came to see Alsace as a symbol of Europe. The fierce debates over the ‘Alsace issue’, which in the late 1890s had become increasingly virulent in what was then an ‘Imperial Province’, can be seen as the beginnings of the kind of European thinking that Flake, Schickele and Wendel went on to develop. The concept of ‘intellectual Alsatianess’, which they elaborated as a possible answer to the ‘Alsace question’ after 1902 and pursued up to the middle of the century, prefigures – to cite an expression used by Anne Kwaschik (2012: 392) – their ideas on Europe after 1918.

While literary scholars agree that 1914 represents a discursive boundary with regard to the idea of Europe (Bonneville, 1961; Cholu, 2013; Lützeler, 1997: 15), this boundary does not necessarily exist with regard to Alsace. The line of argument pursued in determining this limit was as follows: while the literary discussion of Europe went
right back to the Middle Ages, the debate on a union of states of this nature was, as Nicole Savy suggests, ‘encore dans les limbes’ (1996: 173), even at the time of Victor Hugo’s famous opening speech at the International Peace Conference in Paris on 21 August 1849, in which he invoked the ‘United States of Europe’ (1985: 299–304). According to Claude C. Conter, the curtain had fallen on Europe following the founding of the German Empire in 1871 (2004: 647) and it was only after ‘le coup de pistolet de Sarajevo’, as Paul Claudel put it (1965 [1947]: 1381), that in literary circles more specific thought began to be given to the political shape of Europe. For those in Alsace, however, the curtain had lifted earlier – if, indeed, it had ever fallen at all – so that the idea that 1914 might constitute a discursive boundary must be put back a few years, at least to around 1900.

But that is not all. Especially in the political sciences and in economic texts on a ‘Europe of the regions’ (e.g. Schelter and Wuermeling, 1995; Böttcher, 2002; Isensee, 2016), a future ‘key function for the process of European unification overcoming nation-state thinking’ is attributed to border regions such as Alsace (Baumann, 2013: 183). By contrast, my example shows the extent to which border discourses can already be seen to have acquired such a function with regard to European thinking in the past. For this literature of the Alsace border region, Europe offered the possibility of renouncing the concept of nationhood based on homogeneity and, therefore, on violent exclusion in which many Alsatians did not find themselves represented. Seen in this light, the history of the people of Alsace who were torn apart by the concept of nations – encompassing war situations in which family members found themselves on opposite sides – and who saw in Europe a solution for their future, should give present-day advocates of nationalism food for thought.

Notes
1 ‘Vereinigung reichsländischer Dichter und Litteraturfreunde’ (‘Association of poets and friends of literature of the Reichsland’).
2 ‘Wir sind trotzig und froh, ein wild-heiteres Blut, das das Preußentum in der Kunst haßt wie das Preußentum im Leben.’
3 ‘Elsässertum ist nicht etwas Rückständiges, landschaftlich Beschränktes, nicht Verengung des Horizontes, Provinzialismus, “Heimatkunst”, sondern eine ganz bestimmte und sehr fortgeschrittene seelische Haltung, ein fester Kulturbesitz, an den romanische sowohl wie germanische Tradition wertvollste Bestandteile abgegeben haben’ (Stadler, 1983: 280).
4 ‘“Elsässer” wird ein . . . psychologischer Begriff für die Wesensart aller geistigen Kinder werden, die gallisches und deutches Blut nährt.’
5 ‘Aus dem Zwang, ein Grenzland zu sein, macht das Elsäß den Vorzug; das ist der Ausweg, die Hoffnung, die Zukunft.’
6 The play remained unpublished with the exception of the first act, which Herwarth Walden printed in his journal Das Theater in 1909 (Schickele, 1907; 1909; Meyer, 1975).
7 ‘Mittelländer! Ihr seid das kultivierteste Volk Europas, nein, der Welt’ (Schickele, 1959a: 24).
8 ‘Menschen, welche zu umfänglich sind, um in irgend einer Vaterländerei ihr Genüge zu finden . . ., die geborenen Mittelländer, die “guten Europäer”’. On the connection between Alsace and the good European before the First World War, see also Lichtenberger (1913).
9 ‘sondern sich für die wahrere Mission . . . des Verständnisses, des vergleichenden und sich ausgleichenden Europäertums zu entscheiden’.
‘Er hielt es nicht für eine Utopie, daß aus der Synthese von Deutschem und Französischem ein letzter europäischer Geist entstehen werde.’

‘Dreißig Jahre waren ausgelöscht, Sekunde der Ewigkeit und Hälfte eines Lebens. Womit hatte ich sie verbracht? Mit einem Traum, mit Realität, die in den Abgrund der Zeit stürzte.’

‘Was blieb, wenn man sich retten wollte? Nicht Frankreich, nicht Deutschland, nur das Dritte, das übergeordnete geistige Reich, dem selbst der letzte Rest von Bodenständigkeit versagt war . . . Man wird nicht Europäer aus Wahl, man wird es aus Not.’

‘Wir sinnen auf eine Form des künftigen Europa, die erlaubt, zwar auf Verwirklichung durch Macht zu verzichten, aber das Ziel der deutschen Gemeinsamkeit gleichwohl zu erreichen. Diese Form kann nur diejenige sein, die die Macht durch die Freiheit ersetzt. . . . So taucht das wieder auf, was heute den geringsten Börsenwert besitzt: die Idee des geeinten Europa, das die Grenzen, die stehenden Heere, die nationalen Münzsysteme und anderes abgeschafft hat.’

‘Er [der Staatenkosmos] ist erst möglich als Bund und stellt als solcher die höchste Idee dar, die ebenso souverän und gegeben ist wie der Egoismus: die Idee der Gerechtigkeit, der Gleichberechtigung, des Friedens, der Duldung.’

‘Man kann nicht mehr deutsch denken und nicht mehr französisch oder englisch. Man kann nur noch europäisch-synthetisch denken.’

‘Europa . . . ist mir der Geist von morgen, dessen Züge in uns zur Sichtbarkeit drängen.’

‘Steiß mir die Pforten zum liebevollen Verständnis der französischen Gesittung und Geschichte . . . auf’.

‘Dass mir heute Baudelaire fast so viel sagt wie Heine, dass ich Chamfort geniesse wie Lichtenberg, dass mich Renoir heisser beglückt als Thoma, dass ich Chamfort geniesse wie Lichtenberg, dass ich Rostands “Cyrano de Bergerac” immerhin lieber sehe als Uhlands “Herzog Ernst von Schwaben”, und dass mir die Grosse Revolution ein täglich neues, aufwühlendes Erlebnis bedeutet, während mich der Siebenjährige Krieg nicht tiefer erschüttert als der Peloponnesische.’

‘Dass ich derart, französisches Wesen liebgewinnend, ohne deutches Wesen zu verleugnen, beizeiten in mir den Grund zum guten Europäer legte’.

‘Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands’.

‘Wir dürfen keiner Täuschung unterliegen: die schwarzweißrote Fahnenstange hat in elsässischer Erde nie Wurzel geschlagen, sie ist ein totes Stück Holz geblieben.’

‘Den Unterschied zwischen Freund und Feind hatten sie selbst verwischt, wie sie ineinander eingedrungen waren, sich miteinander durchsetzt hatten, sie lagen, wo sie gefallen waren, unlöslich verstrickt und Schicht um Schicht übereinander geworfen und zugedeckt vom jahrelangen Ausbruch des Berges. Sie trennen? Gerade so leicht hätte man den Berg gespalten . . .’

‘Das Land der Vogesen und das Land des Schwarzwaldes waren wie die zwei Seiten eines aufgeschlagenen Buches – ich sah deutlich vor mir, wie der Rhein sie nicht trennte, sondern vereinte, indem er sie mit seinem festen Falz zusammenhielt. Die eine der beiden Seiten wies nach Osten, die andre nach Westen, auf jeder stand der Anfang eines verschiedenen und doch verwandten Liedes.’

‘Die neuen Denkmäler Europas . . . Tempel unseres ewigen Friedens’.

‘Ich für meine Person gehe mit der französischen Elite einem geeinten Europa entgegen, dessen Herzstück der deutsch-französische Bund sein muß und sein wird. En avant! Uns voran schreiten Genies wie Victor Hugo und Jean Jaurés . . . So will ich denn wie ein kleiner elsässischer Meßbub hinter ihnen herlaufen und von Zeit zu Zeit ein wenig die Klingel rühren.’
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