

METZ REVISITED

IT is now sixty years since the surrender of Marshal Bazaine's army in Metz, and only the very old can have a personal recollection of that fateful war, and only the extremely aged can have taken any active part in it, if indeed any such are still alive.

I was in Metz as a boy when we were as near to the war of 1870 as we are now to the war of 1914, and it so happened that owing to certain circumstances the events of that all important drama were early impressed on my mind to an unusual extent. I soon became fascinated by it and as I grew older read anything that bore on the subject and eagerly listened to any stories from those who had taken part in it. 'The war,' as we always called it, was the one outstanding event in Europe to my mind, and it has haunted me ever since.

Since that day I never re-entered Metz or Strasbourg until the year 1929, but twenty years ago I went over the battlefields round Metz, walking over the then frontier from Pagny-sur-Moselle. A dislike of seeing the German uniforms in those provinces had grown up with me, though I was not, and never have been, anti-German as such. Indeed, the recovery of the lost provinces ought to go far to end the Franco-German hostility, just as in the sixteenth century Sir F. Walsingham said of Calais: 'That was the great obstacle to any Anglo-French friendship, but now that it has gone (*i. e.*, the French have it), where is the difficulty?'

I have written that we were in Metz and it was literally so, for in those days the *enceinte* still existed. The old station was a terminus, into which the trains from Luxembourg entered by a curiously circuitous line to the West, just outside the *Porte Serpenoise*. After crossing a ditch or two you dived by a sharp curve through the *enceinte* and were in the town with the

citadel and its *glacis* on your left; but the Metz of older days only begins with the rue Serpenoise beyond the Place de la République.

It is difficult to form a picture of the Metz of 1870 or of any time previous to the building of the new town. To follow the course of the *enceinte* we will walk east from the Moselle by the Avenues Joffre and Foch to the Place Mazelle, thence by the Remparts des Allemands keeping inside the Seille stream to the rue Paixhans. From there it made by the Place Chambière to the Pont and Porte de Thionville and so round by the promenades on the Moselle to the Pont des Morts. There was a gap to the south covered by the Moselle which separates the Ile St. Symphorien from the Ile de Saulez. The whole of the west side of the *enceinte* was further covered by the Fort Moselle across the Pont des Morts, of which part still exists. It was a double crown work of immense strength. On the east side of the *enceinte* from the Porte des Allemands stretched the huge fortress of Bellecroix as far as the Seille's junction with the Moselle. There were also minor works. Outside all this was a circle of detached forts which could have enfiladed an enemy on whatever route he tried to approach. These were St. Julien, covering the whole of a low hill to the north-east, with a natural *glacis* on three sides. South of this lay Les Bottes, and again south of this and one and a half miles from Metz lay Fort Queuleu. Still further south and two miles distant from the town was Fort St. Privat which was never in an effective state during the siege. It must not be confused with the scene of the battle which lies ten miles or more to the north-west. Due west lay St. Quentin, the most formidable of all the detached forts, and one mile north again you found Plappeville, not so naturally strong, whilst due north near the Thionville line was St. Eloy, a very important outwork.

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Metz was the strongest place in Europe, as it is today, but nothing when compared to what the Germans had left it by 1914, and the French engineers are still adding improvements, a double line, of which the names and positions can be found in a local guide to Metz. It was always impregnable to assault and the King of Prussia forbade any attempt, but the strongest place must yield to famine.

The investment of Metz came to pass in this way. On August 6th the terrible disaster of Woerth or Froeschwiller had taken place and Marshal MacMahon was in full retreat—we might almost say flight—and from day to day it was hardly known where he was. The blood red day of Woerth was trebly unfortunate in its great loss of men, in the destruction of the Ollivier ministry, and the failure of MacMahon, the most esteemed of French soldiers. I say the downfall of Ollivier and the resignation of the command by Napoleon were unfortunate, not because either were very capable men, but because these changes introduced a fresh element of uncertainty to a situation already very dark and critical. 'Therefore,' in the words of the Emperor, 'the command was given to Bazaine.' He was an astute man and had successfully pushed aside Marshal Leboeuf, late Minister of War and Major-General, a post specially invented to satisfy his vanity. These two men hated one another, and certainly whatever opinion we may have of Bazaine, Leboeuf and Frossard were supremely futile, and these were the two Court pets.

Bazaine had a very difficult task. Metz was wholly unprepared then to stand a siege and his reserve of ammunition could not be found until the eve of the first of the battles round Metz, and when it was found millions of cartridges were useless from damp. Leboeuf had a strange idea of being *archiprêt*. It has

been said that Bazaine made a difficult situation worse by trying to stop the enemy's advance and at the same time to run away. That is not fair, and I can see no trace of such folly. Bazaine was a rough, coarse man but he never lacked courage. He had at all costs to try and avoid his magnificent army being bottled up in Metz and the Prussians had to strain every nerve to bring that to pass. He fought very well in the battles round Metz, at Colombey, August 12th, to the east and at Gravelotte August 16th-18th on the west. It was only owing to persistent ill-luck and mismanagement, for which the Marshal was not primarily responsible, that the French were finally driven into the fortress.

The most murderous fighting was at Mars la Tour-Rezonville on the 16th, and at Gravelotte-St. Privat on the 18th. There was no science in the Prussian attack—only stupidity and sheer force. Bravery there certainly was, for these men advanced to certain death from the mitrailleuses until the exhaustion of the French ammunition. It was marvellous that no attempt was made to outflank the French, who could not advance owing to the much greater length of the German line. If the Germans had attacked up the Orne or from the Bois de Vaux the French would have had to retire with very little fighting. It was a needless day of murderous slaughter. Not only ammunition failed the French, but food too, and three days of incessant marching and fighting with insufficient rest caused their men to give way without taking into account the great numerical superiority of the Germans. The losses of those two days (on the 17th there was very little fighting) are not known, but Mr. Robinson, who was there throughout the siege, thought that the French losses 'were at least thirty thousand, and for the Prussians it must have been doubly or trebly murderous.'

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The siege lasted for seventy days if we count from the day of Gravelotte to October 27th. Contrary to the case of Strasbourg there was little or no bombardment of the town : starvation was to do its work. The activity came from the side of the besieged, who made many sorties. Those resulting in the battles at Servigny and Noiseville, both to the east, August 31st and September 1st, came very near to success, and indeed the troops seem to have been recalled when another evening's fighting would have carried the position. Confused and divided counsels were responsible for this failure as for many another. The Marshal and General Coffinières, the commandant of the place, would not work together, and it is only too true that Bazaine's relations were bad with all except his own *coterie*. He was also very callous in all that pertained to his men's comfort and never visited the hospitals. The town had more confidence in its commandant than the army had in Bazaine.

General von Zastrow was of the opinion that Bazaine might have broken out early in the time and might also have avoided being driven into Metz on the 18th. Such was also the opinion of the Messins with regard to the sortie of the 31st; but civilian views on such matters, as we learned to our cost in the war of 1914, are invariably wrong. Von Zastrow's statement carries weight, but he could not then have known of the exhaustion of the French ammunition on the 18th—all he saw was an inexplicable retreat—nor could he gauge the possibilities open to the besieged.

Be that as it may, Bazaine's conduct after Sedan and the downfall of the Empire is difficult to explain, for it certainly showed a marked contrast to his actions previously. No one now regards him as a traitor in the ordinary sense of the word, but he does not seem to have shown real energy in the defence, and politics no doubt entered into his calculations. When he

heard that the mob were in power in Paris and the larger towns, when he found that the memory of persons whom he honoured was reviled, he felt no great interest in supporting the provisional government. As a soldier he realised that the game was up and that tolerable conditions might be accorded to the Empress or to a Regent, conditions which Bismarck would not grant to a form of government which he detested. He may have been working for the dynasty, he may have had simply the interests of France at heart, he may have hoped to have been made Regent; he was certainly not working for the Republic. Why should he? Further resistance would only end in worse disaster, and he owed his position and everything which he had to the Emperor. Gratitude is something, and we do not see much of it in this world.

Time fails us in which to trace the progress of the siege and the mysterious negotiations of Bazaine, the visit to Chislehurst of Generals Bourbaki and Boyer and of a M. Regnier. The real significance has never been made clear. Moreover they can be read in many a book, and the course of the war of 1870 is not yet clear in all its details; not yet has it become history.

By the time the autumn had worn to the twenties of October it had become plain, even to the more energetic such as Coffinières, that nothing remained but capitulation. General Changarnier had an interview with Prince Frederic Charles on October 25th, and it was arranged to send representatives to discuss the preliminaries of surrender. The final meeting was at Frescaty on October 27th, and the German commissioners were Generals Stiehle, chief of the staff, and Wartensleben, and the French General Jarras, chief of Bazaine's staff, and Colonel Fay, for Coffinières. The French laid down their arms at one o'clock on the 29th, but the Imperial Guard, to the number of thirty thousand, marched out with their arms and laid them

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down at Frescaty whilst passing in review before the Red Prince. These magnificent troops passed amid respectful silence, but the German army was naturally elated at the sight of the elimination from the war of the very pick of the French troops. On the same day von Zastrow, commander of the seventh corps, entered Metz by the Porte Serpenoise as military governor.

Thus there fell to Prussia a prize of war unparalleled in history. A first class fortress, three Marshals (Bazaine, Leboeuf, Canrobert), sixty-six generals, over six thousand officers, one hundred and eighty thousand men, including the flower of the French army, nearly one thousand six hundred *bouches à feu* (guns of all kinds, including *mitrailleuses*), fifty-four eagles, *chassepôts* (rifles) beyond count, and an immense amount of military stores. It is well to reflect that the war of 1914 can show nothing in any way to be compared to this capitulation. Only in the previous month had the Emperor and ninety thousand men been captured at Sedan. For dramatic effect the war of 1870 has no match.

On November 19th, 1918, the French troops, led by Marshal Pétain and Generals de Maud'huy and Mangin, both Messins, entered by the Porte Serpenoise and the forty-eight years of foreign rule was over. The town received them with acclamation and delight, for Lorraine has never been anything but French in sentiment. There is no question of that mysterious and illusive thing, race. On both sides of the frontier for many miles the folk are of mixed Germanic and Celtic origin; it is merely the political history of Lorraine and Alsace respectively which seems to make a marked difference between the two (see my 'Problem of Alsace,' *Scottish Hist. Rev.*, October, 1923). It is curious to notice that in new Metz you hear nothing but French, probably because much of it was inhabited by German immigrants who have gone, whereas in the old

town much German is spoken. The same phenomenon is to be observed at Strasbourg, though there, of course, the German-speaking population is much greater. The dialect is far removed from the German of the Reich and like the Schweizerdeutsch, though to a less extent, is barely intelligible to a North German. The Bishop of Metz found his position somewhat invidious, and resigned to make way for a Lorrainer from France.

The first thing which strikes the eye of one revisiting Metz after so many years, though it is not older than 1908, is the colossal station. It is an extraordinary building in heavy romanesque style. No one but a German could have imagined such a thing, and for a place like Metz it is ridiculous. No one quite knows what to do with it. However, it has its points. There is an excellent restaurant and you can buy miscellaneous things in its shops, you can get information on local matters at the *bureau de renseignements*, you can have your hair cut, have a bath, and do a variety of things. The old station still stands, but is now given up to the *bureau de traction* and other offices of the railway.

To the left of the Porte Serpenoise towards the esplanade, where Ney has stood since 1855, is the *hôtel* of the military governor. This is a building, 1904, in the style of the German Renaissance on the model of many buildings in South German towns. It is really a very attractive object, nicely clothed with Virginia creeper and it possesses a good garden.

The glorious Cathedral is naturally the same, but we pause to consider what has happened to Blondel's classical porch. The medieval church had no entrance on the façade. It has gone without regrets, and the Germans replaced it by the new *portail du Christ* in the Gothic style, which is to their credit. In it are many statues and amongst them the prophet Daniel,

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which is a very fair likeness of William II. The middle of the Place St. Jacques, the vegetable market, is now occupied by a statue of Our Lady, 1924. The Porte des Allemands, old when Charles V laid siege to Metz, has certainly not altered, but it contains a local museum which no one should fail to see. It is full of relics of the war. Uniforms, weapons, engravings of the chief actors of those days, plans of the battlefields, proclamations of Bazaine, Coffinières, and of the town authorities on paper of every hue as the scarcity in Metz increased, orders of the Prussian governor and commandant in the early days of the occupation. These were largely warnings as to the consequences of doing aught against the German soldiers, but also assuring the inhabitants that their property would be scrupulously respected for all who behaved well. It is a fact that in spite of a few exceptions never before had an army shown itself so disciplined and less inclined to pillage.

It is worth while to walk by the road to St. Julien, and also to visit Frescaty. More pleasant is the expedition by steamer to Moulins. We pass Longeville, where Napoleon spent the 14th and 15th of August on his fatal path to Sedan, and we get a good view of Ban St. Martin, Bazaine's headquarters. We stop at Moulins and climb up to St. Quentin, whence is a splendid view, and we descend by another path to Moulins, where we can enjoy a *friture* and the excellent white wine of Scy at the 'Faisan' and then re-enter Metz by tramway.

It is always well to begin at the beginning, and a visit to Alsace and Lorraine would clear the bewildered mind of many of our folk who visit the scenes of 1914. We seem to have fought (1) For the integrity of Belgian soil which is true, for much the same reasons as we have fought Frenchmen and Spaniards in the past; (2) For the principle of nationality; (3) To make the

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world safe for democracy! (4) to end war—and so on and so forth. But the practical, unsentimental, realist Frenchman has no doubt on the matter. The object was the recovery of the provinces, and nothing else. Symbolically, it is typified by the substitution on the locomotives of 'Als' for 'Els' and 'Lor' for 'Loth,' recently reduced to 'A,' 'L.' I can always argue with and understand Frenchmen, even when we differ, because their minds are clear of sentiment and cant.

MAURICE WILKINSON.

AD PETRUM PLORANTEM

IN the dark night
Of God's death-plight
Love's eyes were called to weeping
Not to sleeping.

Yet now let love oust fears
And bid an end to tears.
Enough thine eyes have wept
That once they slept.

VINCENT MCNABB, O. P.