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Mountain associations and their changing perceptions of the border area

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# The Vosges, border of Alsace (1871-1914)

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Sébastien Stumpp and Julien Fuchs

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- <sup>1</sup> To try to define the borders of the Alsace region between the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries may appear like a seemingly impossible task. The political boundaries formed by the obvious topographic lines represented by the Rhine and the Vosges Mountains are not sufficient to understand how this region, whose inhabitants proclaimed their geographical identity as being located ‘between France and Germany’ (Wahl, Richez, 1993), emerged as a cultural area in its own right. While these natural boundaries were, by definition, fixed, they were also subject to collective projections that allowed them to exist mainly as mobile boundary markers, symbolic areas playing a powerful identificatory and particularising role. To the east, the Rhine represented an historic, natural and national landmark, inextricably linked to the construction of the French nation following the Treaty of Ryswick (Nordman, 1998, p. 309). With the German annexation of Alsace in 1871, the Rhine came to represent, according to many French and Alsatian intellectuals of the day (Onésime Reclus, Fustel de Coulanges, Louis Bouquier), an abrupt boundary separating civilisation from barbarism and protecting Alsace against assimilation. This view was in total contradiction to the German conception of the Rhine serving as a link between the Germanic populations established on either side of its course (Turetti, 2008). To the west, attitudes towards the Vosges Mountains were more ambivalent. This fixed political border separating the French and German territories in its southern and central parts (between the Ballon d’Alsace and Mont Donon<sup>1</sup>), represented a highly mobile border in the minds of the Alsatian people. While the ‘blue line of the Vosges’ was considered to be an ‘integrative’ boundary, uniting Alsace to France and therefore symbolically protecting the region from Wilhelmine Germany, it also represented a ‘distinctive’ boundary, relegating national allegiances to the rank of a second-class identity and affirming local cultural distinctiveness. This ambiguous feeling of national belonging on the part of the Alsatian people contributed to the progressive establishment of a regional culture (dialect and lifestyle) that drew its roots from both French and German cultural

backgrounds without ever fully merging with either one. The natural border running along the ridge line of the Vosges Mountains represented an established boundary delimiting the areas of French and German sovereignty. It also represented a projection of identity from which sprang an ambivalent relationship with regard to others and to the territory. Indeed, this area was viewed as both open, conducive to exchanges between the Alsatians and the French, and at the same time closed, due to the feeling of 'otherness' that the inhabitants of the region fostered within a border area that separated them from 'the others' (Sahlins, 1996, p. 301).

- 2 The way in which the local mountain associations of the time, developing activities that spanned borders and crossed areas (notably hiking and skiing), considered this high-lying border region during the German annexation illustrates the vacillating and ambivalent attitude of the Alsatian people with regard to the Vosges Mountains. As we will see, these associations promoted the existence of a cultural border area that was both real and imagined, distinguishing Alsace from its French and German neighbours and conveying a notion of a border that was sometimes seen as unifying and sometimes as dividing.

## The Vosges: mountain associations and their perceptions

- 3 With 'civil society' in Europe structuring itself around sporting and cultural clubs during the second half of the nineteenth century, the Alpine Clubs and Touring Clubs introduced initiatives aimed at the discovery of mountain ranges and the dissemination of knowledge related to high-lying areas, with the purpose of promoting scientific, cultural and geopolitical objectives. At the same time, mountain associations in many regions or provinces affected by nationalist demands (the Basque Country, Trentino, Slovakia and Catalonia, for example), were pervaded by the spirit of regional patriotism. These associations went to extreme lengths to catalogue local identities, emphasizing the cultural, political, or even ethnic distinctiveness of the regions they travelled through and developed, thereby nurturing the idea of border areas with unique identities. The Alsatian associations fully integrated these particularistic issues. Through a variety of institutions that at that time had no equivalent in France or Germany, the movement resonated with a clear and popular passion for nature and hiking expeditions, built around a unique perception of the Vosges border.
- 4 For many centuries considered an inhospitable region, the Vosges Mountains saw the arrival, at the end of the seventeenth century, of men of science interested in studying their flora, fauna and geology. Botanists, archaeologists, and writers (Johann-Wolfgang Goethe), followed by historians (Jean-Daniel Schoepflin) and artists (Henri Lebert), contributed to the knowledge and development of this area. While in eighteenth century engravings, the Vosges still existed only as a frieze or backdrop (Richez, 1994a, p. 60), the works of these scholars were influential in gradually changing collective representations. The nineteenth century was marked by a mainstream desire to rediscover nature, while the new lithographs popularised the mountains to the point of making them a stereotype of the Alsatian countryside. In response to the industrialisation and urbanisation of cities and suburbs, and facilitated by the development of the railway network that opened up the valleys, nature expeditions came to represent a true 'social and cultural need' (Huck, 1972, p. 234). Fuelled by a

strong tradition of pilgrimage, excursions into the Vosges Mountains thus gradually became less unconventional.

- 5 The climate at that time was conducive to the development of a network of small organisations specialising in the discovery of the local mountains through hiking. Learned societies such as the Natural History Society of Colmar (1859) and the Vosges-Rhineland Philomatic Society (1861), as well as other associations specialised in physical leisure activities such as the Sunday Academy (1858), were active throughout the 1860s organising ‘cultivated hiking excursions’ in the Vosges. Through associations such as the Alsace-Vosges Society (1868), the Vosges Club (1872), or the different ski and tourism clubs (Vosges-Trotters, the Mulhouse Ski Club and the Vosges Touring Club) created at the turn of the twentieth century, hiking excursions gradually became more accessible to all. Mobilising increasing numbers of staff, these associations were essential actors in Alsatian community life in the late nineteenth century. Building up a real ‘urban hiker habitus’ (Wahl, Richez, 1993, p. 273), they no longer portrayed the Vosges as a panoramic landscape, but as a well-made, perfectly defined and delimited whole (Richez, 1994a, p. 64). Intensifying in this way the region’s mythicized, yet reassuring, historical and cultural distinctiveness, mountain hiking took on a strong sense of identity. Within this context, psyches gradually moved away from the Rhine, a border that had ‘haunted the imaginations’ for two millennia (Nordman, 1998, p. 13), and towards the ridge line of the Vosges. Hikers were very much aware of the political and cultural significance of this border, which they saw as uniting Alsace to France rather than as dividing these two countries, as evidenced by the continuity of the hiking trails made by associations from both sides. For these associations, the Vosges constituted an area to be covered rather than a border to be crossed, contributing in a way to the construction of the sense of belonging of the Alsatian people to a very distinctive area and culture. The discovery of the mountain range allowed the local populations to take better stock of their territory, and thus contributed to the construction of a ‘nation of substitution’ between the Vosges and the Rhine. Following the German annexation of Alsace in 1871, the Vosges border area became the privileged place of reconciliation with the motherland. By hiking on the ridges, through the Hantz or the Schlucht passes, walkers approached this invisible border, sometimes crossing it to tread on French soil. This act, which became practically a ritual and could even represent the sole purpose of the excursions, also contributed to cultivating the notion of regional distinctiveness, proof of the capacity of local communities and social groups to forge their own identities (Sahlins, 1996, p. 24). In this sense, the symbolically permeable line of the Vosges Mountains possessed a heuristic value that far outweighed any metaphorical usefulness (Wilson, Donnan, 1998, p. 25). It played both an integrating and a differentiating role in the construction of the identity of the region, as opposed to the Rhine, the indisputable and fundamentally dividing boundary between Alsace and Germany.

## An ‘integrative’ border

- 6 From the 1860s on, Alsatian hikers began playing with territorial boundaries. Although the crest of the Vosges mountain range served as an administrative boundary, most local associations disregarded this division. For example, the Vosges-Rhineland Philomatic Society, an Alsatian association promoting hiking in the Vosges in order to

keep their members up-to-date with the latest scientific progress, specifically targeted the exploration of the mountain range and the plains of Alsace and Lorraine. Thus, the peaks of the Vosges clearly played a unifying role, the purpose of the Society being to:

‘... unite Alsatians and Lorrainers. The snow line or *snowmelt* (*Schneeschmetze*) line shall no longer represent an impassable barrier separating two neighbouring provinces that are so worthy of mutual cordiality and respect. The mixing of limited nationalities will facilitate the fusion of all within the great French nation.’<sup>2</sup>

- 7 The Alsace-Vosges Society, which promoted mountain tourism activities, took a similar viewpoint. Its aim was to raise awareness of the Vosges Mountains and the neighbouring regions, making access easier and more pleasant for tourists<sup>3</sup>, in such a way that the ‘two provinces of the Vosges’<sup>4</sup> would become places of pilgrimage for its members.
- 8 This situation changed, however, with the annexation of Alsace by Germany in 1871, which transformed the Vosges Mountains into an international political border. Indeed, the Germans attempted to establish a very divided view of the border area. Where before one referred to ‘the Vosges’, following annexation the mountain range was divided into two distinct areas: the Alsatian Vosges and the French Vosges. The Vosges-Rhineland Philomatic Society became the Alsace-Lorraine Philomatic Society (*Philomatische-Gesellschaft in Elsass-Lothringen*), and limited its activities to the scientific study, and therefore the discovery on foot, of the annexed region<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, in 1872 the German authorities supported the creation of a hiking club, the *Vogesklub* (Vosges Club), and, in 1896, of its winter counterpart, the *Ski-Klub Vogesen* (Vosges Ski Club), which both became instruments of Germanisation. With the ostensible purpose of promoting hiking, notably via the creation of trails and the development of infrastructures in the Alsatian Vosges, these clubs also worked to debunk the integrative view of the ridge border represented by the ‘blue line of the Vosges’, which had united Alsace to France prior to 1871. The inhabitants of the region were taught to ‘experience’ the German area, to turn their gaze to the *Vater Rhein* when climbing the Vosges summits in order to admire the ‘splendid view of the Black Forest with the blue-tinged, snowy peaks rising above the Rhine Valley’, and to hear ‘the sound of the church bells in the Rhine Plain’<sup>6</sup>.
- 9 However, the ties with France were not really loosened for all that. While the Alsatian people did not necessarily respond to the lure of first Boulangism, and then the nationalism of Maurice Barres, they maintained throughout the annexation a real ‘sense of devotion’ with regard to France (Wittich, 1900). In this context, the majority of the region’s inhabitants considered the Vosges to be an integrative border: although a natural barrier between France and Alsace, the mountains nevertheless continued to symbolically connect the two territories. While for the most part the Alsatian people remained on the sidelines of the *Vogesklub*’s activities, they were particularly committed to ‘stepping over’ the peaks of the Vosges, building bridges with France via the mountain associations.
- 10 To this end, in the mid-1870s, some of the local bourgeoisie became members of the French Alpine Club, in particular the Vosges and the Higher Vosges Chapters. They used their membership to advocate the recovery of the lost provinces in the association’s newsletters. An example of this is the account of the inauguration of a view point on the Hohnneck summit offering a wide panorama over the plain of Alsace.  
 ‘A huge French Tricolour was flying on the top of the mountain. A westerly wind blew it towards Alsace, where it was seen from below. Many eyes were turned

towards the Hohnneck, and for more than one of those present, the view of the flag was veiled by tears.<sup>7</sup>

- 11 In comparison, their counterparts in the Austro-German Alpine Club, which had chapters in the three major cities of Alsace (Strasbourg, Colmar and Mulhouse), showed very little interest in organising hiking excursions to the Alsatian side of the Vosges, although it is true that such excursions were already organised by the Vogesenklub. Members of the Austro-German Alpine Club, the vast majority of whom were German, focused mainly on covering areas that required intense physical effort. The Strasbourg Chapter built its first mountain hut in the Austrian Alps and undertook the majority of its hiking excursions in the Central Alps and the Dolomites<sup>8</sup>.
- 12 Other local inhabitants, however, mostly from the middle classes (doctors, employees, tradesmen, etc.), created their own associations (the Mulhouse Vosges-Trotters, the Colmar Vosges-Trotters, the Mulhouse Ski Club, and the Vosges Touring Club) at the turn of the twentieth century. They attributed a deliberately broad meaning to these organisations, describing them as ‘ski and tourism clubs’ (Stumpp, 2007). Notwithstanding their fun goals, these associations undeniably played on the border-crossing myth. Their members regularly ventured across the peaks of the Vosges to hike, participate in alpine ski races organised by French ski clubs, or stay in French Alpine Club or Touring Club de France huts near the border (at Bärenkopf and Rainkopf). The stories of these excursions spread within the associative sphere and sometimes beyond, with an expertly developed dramatisation of events where the issue of the border was central to the plot.

‘We decided to overstep the boundaries. But not to worry - there were ladies present - and the only boundaries we overstepped were those that marked the border, not those of propriety ... We went to eat quiche in Prayé ... To welcome us, [Old Man Dony] had dressed in his smart uniform and stylish kepi with its hunting horn emblem. His daughter Jeanne, a pretty little blonde thing, hoisted the flag in our honour ... We bid a touching farewell to the Dony family and, poles to the fore and a spring in our step, headed back to the border.’<sup>9</sup>

- 13 From 1909 on, several Alsatian ski and tourism clubs took the initiative of joining the French Alpine Club, following the creation of a Winter Sports Commission to develop a new institutional framework for skiing activities in France. The French Alpine Club, in response to this patriotic display by the Alsatian clubs<sup>10</sup>, sent delegations into the region to participate in certain celebrations (inauguration of chalets, French national holiday festivities, etc.). The crossing of the mountain ridge, which took place in both directions, thus came to represent a highly symbolic act.

## An area of differentiation

- 14 While great emphasis was placed on the French specificity of the Vosges border, it acted simultaneously as an area of differentiation. Since the early nineteenth century, the Alsatian people had built their social networks in a self-centring way, i.e., by cultivating a sense of belonging at local level, opposed to French and German forms of centralism. In 1842, an Alsatian academic observed that excessive centralisation in France had undermined the provincial originality that was so prevalent in Alsace, owing to its history and its outlying position relative to Paris<sup>11</sup>. In fact, whatever the region’s sense of national belonging, the local mountain associations, steeped in the idea of an Alsatian territory and notably its particularistic dimension, allowed the

regional populations to identify themselves with wider communities, while still maintaining their sense of differentiation (Sahlins, 1996, p. 289). Within this framework, and reflecting the boundary marked by the Rhine to the east, the Vosges constituted a symbolic boundary delimiting the small Alsatian homeland (*Heimat*) and allowing the Alsatian people to cultivate their distinctiveness.

15 The first scholarly societies in Alsace, while confirming their interest for the whole Vosges area, struggled to hide their commitment to the regional cause during the Second French Empire. Through their studies on the Alsatian side of the Vosges, Gustave-Marie Bleicher and Charles-Frédéric Faudel, leading members of the Natural History Society of Colmar, sought to raise a 'national monument' to their 'beloved province'<sup>12</sup>, while members of the Vosges-Rhineland Philomatic Society favoured the study of an 'Alsatianly provincial' heritage<sup>13</sup>.

16 In the same way, during the German annexation of Alsace, there existed an explicit desire to highlight the originality of the region within the *Wilhelmine Reich*. Excursions to the Alsatian side of the Vosges Mountains allowed for internalising the idea of a specific Alsatian territory. Ski and tourism clubs thus 'staged' their excursions in different ways: emphasis on regional flags, use of dialect, and participation by associations heavily involved in the promotion of local heritage (the Alsatian Theatre, choirs and music societies). Their aim was to forge an intimate, passionate, 'physical' relationship between their members and the region:

'It is our hope that, as a lover of the grandeur and beauty of nature, like us, you will join our ranks and help us encourage the practice [of mountain sports], through which we aim to train the youth of Mulhouse to be robust, fervent and brave, through which we wish to unite all mountain enthusiasts, and work towards a better knowledge of and greater affection for our beloved Vosges, for our proud and beautiful Alsace.'

17 The construction of mountain huts near the Vosges peaks also served as a reminder that the Alsatian region was a legacy handed down through the generations<sup>14</sup>, the distinctiveness of which needed to be preserved. Chalets were thus built at Huss (Mulhouse Ski Club), Schiessrothried (Colmar Vosges-Trotters), and Champ du Feu (Strasbourg Vosges-Trotters). During the inauguration of the Mulhouse Vosges-Trotters' chalet at Markstein in 1911, the club president noted wryly that the Breitfirst hut, which was the property of the Germanophile Ski-Klub Vogesen, would henceforth have a neighbour<sup>15</sup>. This chalet, on which flew the Alsatian flag and the standards of the club, became a visible sign of the Alsatian presence in the Vosges. Indeed, more than just shelters for hikers, club huts became meeting places where forms of sociability usually only found in Alsatian cities were able to develop (annual village festivities or *kilbes*, dances, St. John's Day festivities, etc.). For example, the Colmar Vosges-Trotters started organising their annual *kilbe*, systematically programmed during the feast of St. John, in the club's hut. A dance floor and lanterns would be installed and an orchestra would lead the evening, which always began with a torch-lit ski descent. The following day, the club would organise traditional entertainment (bowling competition, procession in traditional costumes, poetry competition in the local dialect, etc.)<sup>16</sup>. These practices helped establish in the mountains, and therefore close to the border area, traditions that were originally concentrated in the Alsatian Plain. In other words, the aim was to reclaim 'our Vosges'<sup>17</sup> – as in the title of the Vosges Touring Club newsletter, the possessive adjective being clearly used in its full sense here – and for this movement to spread throughout the entire Alsatian region, well beyond the



original seats of the development of the local identity. In this sense, the activities promoted by the Alsatian ski and tourism clubs contained a civic dimension that their French and German counterparts could not convey.

## Conclusion

- <sup>18</sup> From the mid-nineteenth century and the divides drawn by the Franco-German conflicts, Alsace was defined as a 'country of margins' (Raphaël, Herberich-Marx, 1991), where the borders represented a central element of projection and construction of identity. For all that, these borders did not mobilise the same 'affects'. While the Rhine represented a relatively fixed boundary, the same could not be said of the Vosges, whose role was much more complex to comprehend. This mountain range catalysed seemingly contradictory psyches, inspiring integration within France for some, and differentiation compared with France and Germany for others. The Alsatian mountain associations fully embodied this issue. Through their activities, they contributed to the development of the region, the construction of infrastructures, the organisation of excursions, and the renewal of tensions between the 'given' borders, with their clear and intentional boundaries, and the cultural borders, whose lines were more blurred (Bromberger, Morel, 2001, p. 4). In this sense, the main issue here was not so much the mobility of the political borders (from the Rhine to the Vosges and vice versa), but rather the shifts in the very meaning attributed to this border area. The Alsatian mountain associations consequently worked to perpetuate this 'regional attachment' (development of local heritage, refusal to integrate national federations) well beyond the German annexation of Alsace, while also actively promoting the national ideal (Caritey, 1992).

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## NOTES

1. The Franco-German border covered only the specific Higher Vosges section of the Vosges Mountains. This will be the main focus of our study; the Northern Vosges and the rolling hills of the Alsace Bossue will not be discussed here. Nevertheless, in both the French and German psyches, it was most definitely 'the Vosges' that constituted the border (Wahl, Richez, 1993).
2. *Annales de l'Association philomatique vogéso-rhénane*, 1863-1868, p. 5; (Author's translation).
3. Departmental Archives of the Upper Rhine, 4M92. Draft Statutes of the Alsace-Vosges Society (Société Alsato-Vosgienne), 1<sup>st</sup> June 1868.
4. *Annales de l'Association philomatique vogéso-rhénane*, op. cit., p. 5.
5. 'Satzungen der Philomatische Gesellschaft in Elsass-Lothringen', *Mitteilungen der Philomatischen Gesellschaft in Elsass-Lothringen*, 1903, p. 1.
6. *Straßburger Post*, 19<sup>th</sup> January 1897; 'Die Vogesen im Winter', *Die Vogesen*, no.1, 1907, p. 14; (Author's translation).
7. '6<sup>ème</sup> inauguration de la table d'orientation au Hohneck', *Bulletin du CAF, section des Hautes-Vosges*, n°2, 1889, p. 32; (Author's translation).
8. *Die Straßburger Hütte an der Scesaplana*, Straßburg, Dumont-Schauberg, 1905.
9. 'Par Monts et par... Vosges', *Nos Vosges*, no.1, 1911, pp. 3-4; (Author's translation).
10. For example, the letter addressed by the President of the Winter Sports Commission to the President of the Mulhouse Ski Club, thanking him for having sent a delegation of skiers during the international ski competition organised by the French Alpine Club in Gérardmer: 'Let me say once again ... how particularly pleased I was to have caught up with you before you left for the Col de la Schlucht, after having said an emotional farewell to the Alsatian border, which we will never forget.' Private archives of the Mulhouse Ski Club. Letter from Henry Cuénot to Alfred Spieser, 14<sup>th</sup> February 1913; (Author's translation).
11. Cited by G.-M. Bleicher (1894, p. 9)
12. *Bulletin de la Société d'histoire naturelle de Colmar*, 1860, p. 25.
13. *Annales de l'Association philomatique vogéso-rhénane*, op. cit., p. 82.
14. *Accompagnement à l'annuaire*, April 1914. Private archives of the Mulhouse Vosges-Trotters; (Author's translation).
14. *Vogesen Blatt*, 4<sup>th</sup> September 1903.

15. 'Hüttenweihe der Vosges-Trotters Mülhause auf dem Markstein', *Ski und Bergsport in den Vogesen*, no.1, 1911, p. 5.
  16. 'Vosges-Trotters Colmar', *Die Vogesen*, no.14, 1909, p. 234; 'Vosges-Trotters Colmar', *Die Vogesen*, no.12, 1910, p. 211.
  17. *Nos Vosges*, no.1, 1911.
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## ABSTRACTS

During the annexation of Alsace by Germany between 1871 and 1914, the Vosges mountain range took on particular significance for the inhabitants of the region. It represented a boundary that both allowed the Alsatian people to assert their cultural distinctiveness, while at the same time 'integrating' Alsace into France, thereby symbolically preserving the region from attempts to assimilate it into the *Reich*. The way in which local mountain associations promoting hiking and skiing considered this political and cultural border reveals their unique perception of a natural boundary that was fixed by definition, but mobile in its representations. As we will see, these associations tended to particularly promote the existence of a cultural border area – real and imagined – that effectively set the Alsace region apart from both France and Germany. Within this context, the images of the 'blue line of the Vosges' held by the Alsatian members of these clubs differed greatly. Some considered it to be a unifying border that perpetuated the myth of the lost provinces, ritualised the crossing of the Franco-German border, and symbolised their strong ties with the French Alpine Club. Others saw the Vosges more as a dividing border, placing emphasis on language specificities and differences in cultural heritage, the use of mountain huts as centres to celebrate local traditions, and the integration of the mountain range within the 'regional heritage'. In this sense, the main issue here was not so much the mobility of the political borders (from the Rhine to the Vosges during the German annexation of Alsace), but rather the shifts in the very meaning attributed to this border area.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Alsace, mountain associations, hiking, skiing, the Vosges, border

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