CHAPTER NINE

OF OCCUPIED TERRITORIES AND LOST PROVINCES: GERMAN AND ENTENTE PROPAGANDA IN THE WEST DURING WORLD WAR I

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The image of Alsatian and Lorraine, often embodied by two women garbed in traditional regional dress, became a fixture of French wartime propaganda, a reminder of one of the highest tasks the French would fulfill once they had claimed victory: the return of the lost provinces of Alsace-Lorraine.

Figure 9.1. Alsace-Lorraine: A patriotic poster by Auguste Leroux from 1918 urging citizens to subscribe to the war loan. The two women wear the traditional dresses of Alsace and Lorraine (taken by Germany in 1871) with the caption Pour hâter la Victoire, et pour nous revoir bientôt. Souscrivez! Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, Paris (1918)
If Alsace and Lorraine formed one of the key elements of French propaganda, images from the German invasion and occupation of Belgium and northern France formed another; rape, arson, brutality, and murder became the stock in trade of posters and postcards geared at stirring up Allied patriotism and neutral sympathy in the war against the Germans. More broadly, wartime propaganda in the allied countries, as well as in many of the neutral powers, was derived from actions, real and alleged, on the Western Front. For the Germans, the propaganda terrain of the Western Front proved difficult to master.

The territories of Alsace-Lorraine, northern France, and Belgium represented both the battleground and prize of World War I, at least on the Western Front. While combat over the Western Front remained largely static from late 1914 to 1918, the propaganda war over these territories took on a much more dynamic character. Here, both Allied and German propaganda efforts had three distinct targets: the populations of these regions, the respective homefronts of each belligerent, and a broader international audience. Alsace-Lorraine, northern France, and Belgium emerged in posters and postcards, learned tracts and incendiary brochures, and representatives’ stump speeches as key to winning the propaganda. Indeed, the symbolism and imagery about these areas often took on a greater importance than propaganda directed at the populations of the territories themselves.

Unlike in the real conflict over these territories, the Allies enjoyed a decisive advantage over Germany on the propaganda front. Whether in the poor “lost provinces” of Alsace and Lorraine, the ravaged departments of northern France, or the despoiled but “gallant” Belgium, the Allies could paint a picture of German depredation in the face of steadfast bravery. The Germans were compelled to make a more difficult case that pointed to the perfidy of Belgian franc-tireurs or the desire of Alsatians and Lorrainers to be German. German policies in these regions often aided the cause of Allied propaganda as Alsatians and Lorrainers lived under a strict martial regime, and the occupation of Belgium was marred by numerous misdeeds on the part of the Germans. In addition, the German government faced logistical challenges. The French and Belgians, for example, could more easily send representatives to their allied partners and to neutrals to plead their cause; German representatives, especially in the US, had no such easy access. In a general sense, Germany’s propaganda organization—military or civilian, national or local—rarely proved as nimble or insightful as that of its allied counterparts. Moreover, as David Welch has argued, it was on the defensive