

The Christmas Tree Becomes French: From Foreign Curiosity to Philanthropic Icon, 1860-1914

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On December 25, 1874, republican Deputy (later Senator) Léon Laurent-Pichat recorded in his diary: “After lunch to the Châtelet [theater], to the Christmas of the Alsatians and Lorrainers. In a box [*loge*] with Gambetta, Adam, Castelnau, Tiersot, Tirard; L[ouis] Blanc, Barni and his wife next to us. A big crowd.”¹ The presence of these republican dignitaries and Alsatian sympathizers indicates that this was an event of some significance.² So, too, does the longevity of the event. It was inaugurated in 1872 to distribute aid to the children of refugees who flooded into France following France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, and the subsequent cession of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany. The “Christmas tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers,” as the event was generally called, continued annually in Paris until 1918, when Alsace and Lorraine were returned to France, and irregularly thereafter.³ Today, however, the event has been almost entirely forgotten.

While the Christmas tree features prominently in histories of Christmas customs in a number of Western societies, this is not the case for France. The tree did not have a traditional

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¹ Paris, Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris, Fonds Claretie, 2^e partie: Léon Laurent-Pichat, Section VIII A: Journal: vol. 9, Dec. 25, 1874. See also Dec. 25, 1873. As Laurent-Pichat’s journal also indicates, his daughter, Geneviève, and son-in-law, Charles Risler, were both involved regularly in the Christmas tree event (Journal, vol. 9, Dec. 25, 1877; vol. 10, Dec. 25, 1879; Dec. 25, 1880; Dec. 25, 1882; Dec. 25, 1883). See also Fonds Claretie, 1^{ère} partie (Familles Kestner et Risler), Section V, vol. 5: Charles Risler, L’Association générale d’Alsace-Lorraine.

² Gambetta, Adam, Tirard, Tiersot, Blanc and Barni were all republican Deputies. “Castelnau” was probably Édouard de Castelnau, a militant Catholic General but a strong supporter of Alsace-Lorraine who would develop plans for its recapture during the First World War. See <http://www.cheminsdememoire.gouv.fr/en/edouard-de-castelnau>; http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/people_castelnau_edouard.html (accessed September 15, 2016).

³ Although AGAL was largely dormant for a period after 1918, when Alsace and Lorraine were returned to France, the Christmas tree event appears to have continued at least intermittently into the 1950s and it is not clear when the last Christmas tree was held. See Association Générale d’Alsace et de Lorraine, *AGAL, Paris 1871-1996*, 38-9, 43, 55.

presence there, except in Alsace which became French-controlled only in the seventeenth century. Sometimes called “the Luther tree,” it was generally seen as a Protestant symbol, and in predominantly Catholic countries like France the crèche remained the pre-eminent symbol of Christmas.⁴ Studies of French Christmas customs by folklorists and anthropologists have focused on traditions such as *Père Noël* and the evolution of gift-giving, therefore, with the Christmas tree of marginal interest.⁵ Neither ethnologists nor historians have, as yet, traced the incorporation of the tree into domestic Christmas rituals.⁶

The fact that the Christmas tree was not widely utilized in France before the 1870s ensured that the “Christmas tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers” assumed particular significance. It enthroned an iconic Alsatian object as a symbol of patriotism, a patriotism vested in the Republic. Moreover, the symbolism of the Christmas tree was gradually mobilized as an emblem of a republican approach to philanthropy: one inspired by a secular vision of fraternity underpinned by the philosophy of “mutualism.” The Christmas tree event, and the symbol at its center, became public expressions of republican endeavors to address poverty and encourage “self-help.” In this guise, it inspired many, whatever their political affiliation, to give generously to the poor in the festive season.

Thanks to press coverage of “the Christmas tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers” from the 1870s, the largely unfamiliar Christmas tree was legitimated as French. It became an object of public significance, a symbol deployed on the public stage, which facilitated its incorporation into the domestic Christmas celebrations of French families. The evolving public deployment of the Christmas tree in the decades before World War I is the focus of this study.

The Origins of the “Christmas Tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers”

The “Christmas Tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers” was organized each year by the *Association Générale d’Alsace-Lorraine* (AGAL). This Association, established in 1871 by Alsatians and Lorrainers resident in Paris, aimed to assist impoverished emigrants arriving from Alsace and Lorraine following France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, when the Treaty of Frankfurt handed those provinces to Germany.⁷ Waves of emigration continued over several decades, initially due to the “option” clause (which required those who “opted” to retain French citizenship to leave what had now become German territory), and later due to military service requirements and other unpopular measures, such as restrictions on the use of the French language. By 1910, an estimated 460,000 people had left Alsace and Lorraine for France. The majority went to Paris and many arrived there virtually penniless.⁸

AGAL was only one of a number of organizations established to aid the refugees, both in Paris and elsewhere.⁹ It provided food vouchers and lodgings for new arrivals, helped them

⁴ Brunner, *Inventing the Christmas Tree*, 31-3; Perrot, *Ethnologie de Noël*, 256, n. 51; Perrot, *Le Cadeau de Noël*, 78-9; Perry, *Christmas in Germany*, 31. As Neil Armstrong has pointed out with reference to England, however, attitudes to Christmas and its symbols were diverse within Protestantism: “The Christmas Season and the Protestant Churches in England,” 744-62.

⁵ There is a long history of ethnographic work on Christmas myths and practices in France dating back to Arnold Van Gennep’s *Le Manuel de folklore français contemporain* (1937-1958). Anthropologist Martyne Perrot has published widely on the subject more recently. See, e.g., *Ethnologie de Noël*, and *Le Cadeau de Noël*.

⁶ Martyne Perrot suggests that the tree was gradually incorporated into French domestic rituals from the 1870s: *Ethnologie*, 256, n. 51.

⁷ Risler, “L’Association Générale d’Alsace-Lorraine,” *Revue Alsacienne*, Dec. 1879: 54; Grévy, *La République des Opportunistes*, 138-40; Schneider, “1871-1918: Les débuts de l’Association,” in *AGAL, Paris 1871-1996*, 20.

⁸ Silverman, *Reluctant Union*, 65-74; Roth, *La Guerre de 1870*, 643-6, 650-51.

⁹ Offshoots of AGAL were founded, for example, on the outskirts of Paris at Mussy, Levallois-Perret and Asnières, as well as at Chalons (*Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 28 and Dec. 30. 1876, Dec. 28, 1898, Dec. 26, 1901, Dec. 26, 1900, Dec. 25, 1909, Dec. 25, 1911, etc). A politically-conservative *Cercle français Alsace-Lorraine* was founded in 1872 but attracted few adherents (Grévy, *La République des Opportunistes*, 138, 140). Comte d’Haussonville’s *Société de Protection des Alsaciens-Lorrains* established several colonies in Algeria (*Revue*

find work and provided scholarships for the education of children. It also devised the Christmas tree event: a public spectacle based on the celebration of Christmas in Alsatian homes, which featured a pine tree decorated with candles, toys and sweets.¹⁰ The “Christmas Tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers” served both to preserve an Alsatian custom for the refugee children, and to promote the cause of Alsace and Lorraine in Paris. Each December, the Ladies’ Committee of AGAL made an appeal to Parisian businesses for donations of warm clothing, toys and sweets for distribution at that event. In 1874, for instance, on specially designed letterhead, they made their request:

Each year, winter brings its privations and its sufferings. May it also bring for [our compatriots dispossessed by the war] a moment of consolation and the hope of seeing their little children grow up under the generous and enlightened protection of the people of Paris who have welcomed them. This confidence, justified by your goodwill, encourages us to renew the appeal we made to you last year.¹¹ (Fig. 1)

The successful appeal to public generosity linked the Christmas tree event to a charitable tradition that had a long history in France, and which continued and even strengthened after 1870.¹² Donors were entitled to entry tickets to the Christmas tree event, as were Parisians who became members of AGAL.¹³ As a result, the event had a large paying audience.

Each year, around 3,000 children were issued with entry cards for the Christmas tree fete, which was usually held on 25 December.¹⁴ The Christmas tree, brought annually from Alsace, held pride of place there. Reports invariably emphasized its brilliant decoration and its size, described as “immense,” “gigantic,” “enormous” or “monstrous.”¹⁵ In a highly-choreographed ceremony, groups of children processed to the tree to receive their packages. The parade was interspersed with items of entertainment: performances by brass bands, choral societies, gymnastics groups and—the highpoint—celebrities from the major theatre companies including the Comédie-Française and the Opéra de Paris.¹⁶

alsacienne, May 1878). The *Revue alsacienne* also refers (June 1882) to a *Société de protection des Alsaciens et Lorrains demeurés Français*.

¹⁰ Siebecker, *Poésies d'un Vaincu*, 265-6.

¹¹ Association générale d'Alsace-Lorraine. *Paris, 1^{er} Déc. 1874. Comité des Dames. Arbre de Noël*. BNF, Gallica; *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 16, 1872; Dec. 16, 1873.

¹² Perrot, *Ethnologie de Noël*, 72-3. Steven M. Beaudoin notes an upsurge in the number of charities operating in Bordeaux and elsewhere after 1870: “Without Belonging to the Public Service,” 672.

¹³ *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 22, 1872; Dec. 23, 1873; *Revue alsacienne*, Dec. 1879: 75.

¹⁴ Exact numbers are difficult to establish because annual reports did not distinguish the number of children aided at this event from those aided in the course of the year, but newspaper reports frequently cite figures supplied by AGAL. Charles Risler estimated at “more than 3,000” the number of children in attendance each year in “L’Association Générale d’Alsace-Lorraine,” *Revue Alsacienne*, Dec. 1879:58.

¹⁵ *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 22, 1872; Dec. 28, 1875; Dec. 27, 1876; Dec. 27, 1880.

¹⁶ Analysis of the music and verse presented at this event is the subject of my forthcoming article, entitled “The Christmas Tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers’: Spectacle, Emotion and Patriotism in the Early Third Republic,” *French Historical Studies*.

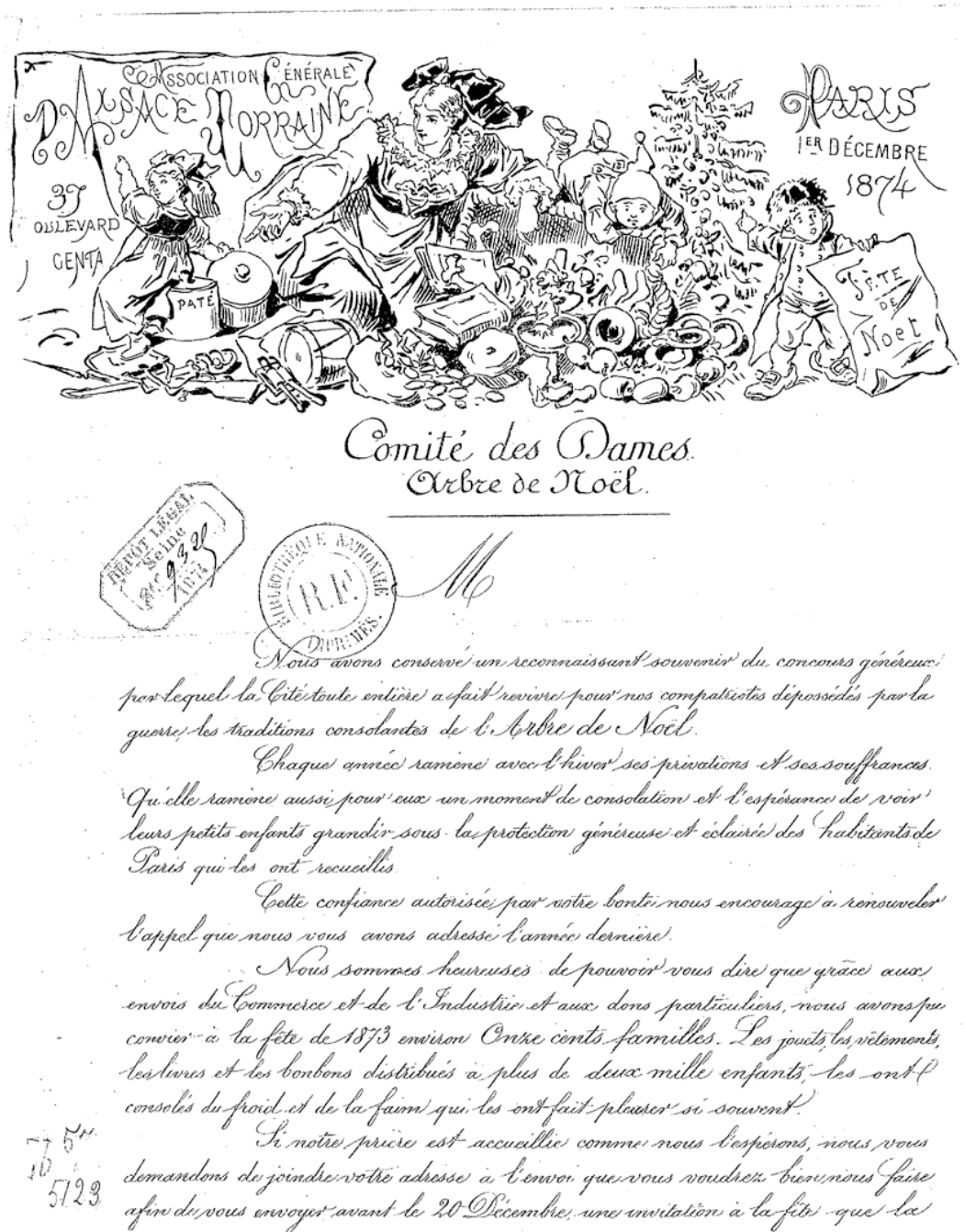


Figure 1 Association générale d'Alsace-Lorraine, Paris, 1^{er} Déc. 1874. Comité des Dames. Arbre de Noël (1874). Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Philosophie, histoire, sciences de l'homme, 4-LB57-5123.
<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6120762h.r=association%20generale%20d%27alsace-lorraine?rk=21459;2>

The event provided an afternoon's diversion for the large crowds who attended and it quickly became an extremely popular occasion. By 1874 it had moved to one of the largest theatres in Paris, the Théâtre du Châtelet, which seated 3,600 people. It would later move to the Hippodrome d'Alma, with double the capacity of the Châtelet, and thence to the Cirque d'Hiver (Cirque de Paris) and the Trocadéro.¹⁷ (See Figs 2 and 3). Newspaper reports

¹⁷ On these theaters and their capacities, see Rouge-Ducos, "Davioud et l'architecture des théâtres parisiens," 88; Yon, *Une Histoire du Théâtre à Paris*, 335-6; Ory, *Le Palais de Chaillot*, 38.

frequently noted the numbers turned away. The attraction exerted by this wondrous curiosity, the Christmas tree, was a vital ingredient in the ongoing success of the annual Christmas event.

A Foreign Curiosity

The Christmas tree was not entirely unknown in France when the first Alsatian-Lorrainer Christmas tree event was held in Paris in 1872. The Duchess d'Orléans (Helene von Mecklenburg-Schwerin) is generally credited with installing a Christmas tree at the court of her father-in-law, King Louis-Philippe, about 1840.¹⁸ Prince Albert— also of German origin — is often said to have introduced the Christmas tree into England around the same time, although his role is hotly disputed.¹⁹ Many stories, plays and pieces of music featuring Christmas trees were created in nineteenth century France, not least Dumas *père*'s popular *Nutcracker* (an adaptation of a tale by German writer E.T.A. Hoffmann).²⁰ But the tree was not a central feature of Christmas celebrations.



Figure 2 AGAL, “Christmas tree event at the Cirque de Paris, Dec. 21, 1911.” The image shows the official party, and girls wearing the regional dress of Alsace and Lorraine (front row). Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, EI-13 (126).

<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b69199624.r=L%27arbre%20de%20No%2C3%ABI?rk=21459;2>

¹⁸ Martin-Fugier, “Bourgeois Rituals,” 286; Perrot, *Ethnologie de Noël*, 36. *Le Petit Journal* also attributes the introduction of the Christmas tree to the Duchess d'Orléans: “Noël,” Dec. 26, 1869.

¹⁹ Other accounts attribute the introduction of the Christmas tree into England to Queen Charlotte around 1800, or simply to German immigrants. See Dodd, “Conspicuous Consumption and Festive Follies,” 41; Storey, “The Invention of the English Christmas,” 21; Barnes, “The First Christmas Tree,” *History Today* 56, no. 12. Neil Armstrong describes the story about Albert as a “notorious popular myth,” in “England and German Christmas *Festlichkeit*, c. 1800-1914,” *German History* 26, no. 4: 489.

²⁰ Alexandre Dumas, *Histoire d'un Casse-Noisette* (Paris, 1844).



Figure 3 AGAL, “Press photograph of the children queuing for AGAL’s Christmas tree event at the Cirque de Paris, Dec. 21, 1911.” Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, EI-13 (126).

<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6919964z.r=L%27arbre%20de%20No%C3%ABl?rk=21459;2>

That the Christmas tree remained a curiosity rather than a familiar and widely deployed Christmas emblem in 1870s France is suggested by the entry on that subject in the Littré Dictionary of 1873: “Christmas tree is used, in some countries, to describe a large branch of pine or holly adorned in different ways, decorated particularly with sweets and toys to give to children, who are delighted by it.”²¹ Surveys of European Christmas customs in *Le Petit Journal* and other outlets during the 1860s and early 1870s also presented the Christmas tree as a novelty. Those surveys described the Christmas tree as “German” though they noted that it had been part of Christmas festivities in Alsace since the sixteenth century.²² Some accounts also noted its use in Christmas festivities in Russia and Scandinavia.²³

But in France the tree was not yet an object symbolizing domestic harmony and happiness, such as it had become for the English middle classes and the Prussian elites by the mid-nineteenth century.²⁴ In the 1860s, the *Petit Journal*’s stories about the Christmas tree were often negative. One emphasized greed and conflict as children fought for the glittering baubles and toys on the tree. Close inspection may have shown “the uselessness, the futility, the fragility” of these trinkets, but the children were overcome by desire. “Mine! Mine! Mine! Was the simultaneous cry of all those trembling with desire who reached out to seize them.”²⁵

²¹ *Dictionnaire de la Langue française par Émile Littré* (Edition 1873-1878), electronic version 3.0. Entry: “Noël, arbre de.”

²² Brunner, *Inventing the Christmas Tree*, 5, 25. See AGAL, *Paris 1871-1996*, 208, which cites a study dating the use of Christmas trees to Alsace in 1521. Perry traces the first use of the Christmas tree to Strasbourg in 1604 (*Christmas in Germany*, 32).

²³ For instance, *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 25, 1863; Dec. 24, 1864; Dec. 24 and Dec. 25, 1866; Dec. 26, 1869; Dec. 26, 1870; Dec. 27, 1871; Marmier, *L’Arbre de Noël*, 5-6.

²⁴ Armstrong, *Christmas in Nineteenth-Century England*, esp. 51-3; Perry, *Christmas in Germany*, 13-31.

²⁵ “Causerie,” *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 22, 1864; Dec. 25, 1863; Dec. 26, 1869.

The author clearly regarded the Christmas tree with deep suspicion, holding it responsible for arousing passions that were the antithesis of the Christmas virtues.

Another story told of individuals burnt to death by upsetting the candles that illuminated the tree. This was the fate in 1864 of travelling salesman “Bernard C.” Swathed in flax to disguise himself as “Nicolas le Velu,” a figure who punished naughty children in Alsatian Christmas folklore, he brushed against the tree and was enveloped in flames. “He was so badly burned that he soon succumbed in the most intense pain.” An almost identical report attributed an identical fate to the insurance agent “Léopold V.” in 1872. Significantly, both the victims were described as Alsatian migrants. Their families had “preserved for [Christmas day] the naïve customs of the North,” which the *Petit Journal* took the opportunity to explain to its readers.²⁶

Insofar as the Christmas tree had a presence in France outside the Alsatian community, according to the *Petit Journal*, it remained the province of well-to-do families. In the mid-1860s, the *Petit Journal* reported that Christmas trees could be purchased at stalls on the boulevards. Small trees decorated dining tables in wealthy households, while in the aristocratic faubourg Saint-Germain and faubourg Saint-Honoré there was “an abundance of Christmas trees laden with lights, toys and presents.” But “in the poorest families, the child puts a shoe in the grate, hoping that the child Jesus will come and leave a toy as an encouragement or as a reward.”²⁷

In the 1870s, the *Petit Journal* began regular coverage of the annual “Christmas tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers.” *Le Petit Journal* was the most widely read of the popular newspapers. Established in 1863 and selling for one *sou*, it had a circulation of 350,000 by 1873, rising to one million by 1886. Many of these copies were sold in the provinces. Its main competitor from the 1880s, *Le Petit Parisien*, would reach a circulation of one million in 1902.²⁸ Reports and images of the Christmas tree event also appeared in a number of other newspapers and periodicals.²⁹ That the newspapers took an interest in the “Christmas tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers” ensured that both the event, and the tree that was its central feature, became familiar to a wide audience across France.

A Republican Icon

Sélestat, in Alsace, claims to be the origin of the Christmas tree. A local brochure declares: “The tradition of the Christmas tree spread across France after the war of 1870. It was those Alsatians who opted to stay in the Land of the rights of man, and became republicans again who spread this tradition.”³⁰ Édouard Siebecker, a founding member of AGAL, had made a similar point in 1879:

Since 1872, the moment of its implantation in Paris by the *Association générale d’Alsace-Lorraine*, the pine tree, illuminated in the Alsatian manner, has been adopted by the great city. This expression, Christmas tree, unknown until then, carries this significance when uttered today by a Parisian – Yes, the festival of the children of Alsace-Lorraine.³¹

²⁶ *Le Petit Journal*, Jan. 2, 1864; Jan. 23, 1872. On Nicolas le Velu, see Perrot, *Ethnologie*, 46.

²⁷ *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 26, 1865; Dec. 26, 1867; Dec. 25, 1868.

²⁸ Bellanger et al., *Histoire générale de la presse française, vol. III*, 137, 174-6, 219-22, 296-301, 305-8; Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 29.

²⁹ For instance, *La République Française, Revue Alsacienne, Le Temps, Le National*.

³⁰ Sélestat, Alsace central, *L’histoire de l’arbre de Noël du XVI^e siècle à nos jours*, 2013: brochure produced by the town to accompany the exhibition “L’Histoire des décorations de l’arbre de Noël.”

³¹ Édouard Siebecker, “L’Arbre de Noël à Paris,” *Revue alsacienne*, Dec. 1879: 71.

But those who organized the annual “Christmas tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers” were not focused on implanting the Christmas tree as a French custom. Rather, they were intent on ensuring that commitment to the recovery of the Lost Provinces should not wane. AGAL deliberately emphasized the association with Alsace-Lorraine of both the Christmas tree itself and the Christmas tree event in order to arouse and encourage patriotic enthusiasm. The event, held in a venue decorated with regional symbols and coats of arms, with women and girls in regional costume, with a program of entertainment that included Alsatian music and songs in the regional dialects, could hardly have evoked Alsace and Lorraine more strongly.³² And in doing so, it necessarily brought to mind France’s defeat and subsequent “mutilation,” as the seizure of Alsace and Lorraine by Germany under the Treaty of Frankfurt was commonly described.

Decorated with small tricolor flags as well as with lights and baubles, therefore, the Christmas tree entered Christmas ceremonial in France in a public context. It did so both to celebrate and mourn the Lost Provinces, and to express devotion to France: specifically to the French Republic. Indeed, the republican associations of the Christmas tree heightened its appeal to many observers.

The displaced patriots from Alsace and Lorraine declared their loyalty to the Republic as they founded their Association in 1871.³³ That loyalty was fully reciprocated. Alsace-Lorraine was a republican “cause” in France from 1870. Led by Léon Gambetta, the republicans condemned Emperor Napoleon III’s declaration of war in 1870 and fought to prevent France’s capitulation to Prussia, Gambetta himself raising a fresh army to do so.³⁴ Throughout the 1870s, the republicans reiterated their commitment to the recovery of the Lost Provinces, though they never put forward a viable means for doing so.

Republican support for the “Christmas tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers” was strong from its inception.³⁵ Gambetta attended the Christmas tree event regularly until his death in 1882; he even helped to distribute chocolate bars to the children at the first Christmas tree.³⁶ As his colleague Léon Laurent-Pichat indicates in his diary, Gambetta was not the only republican politician at this or subsequent events.³⁷ Indeed, not only were republican politicians frequently in the audience, but many of the women on the Ladies’ Committee, which organized the Christmas tree fête, were wives of republican politicians with Alsatian backgrounds. It was a republican event.³⁸

The Christmas tree event continued to attract significant official support, particularly once the republicans assumed power as a result of the 1877 elections. The newspapers frequently noted the celebrities in attendance. In 1880, for instance, both Jules Ferry (President of the Council of Ministers and Minister for Public Instruction) and Léon Gambetta (President of the Chamber of Deputies) attended, along with Senators, Deputies and former Deputies.³⁹

³² See, for instance, *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 27, 1883, Dec. 27, 1884, Dec. 27, 1887; *Revue Alsacienne* 12 (1888-9): 139-43. The “Alsatian” and republican elements of the event are explored more fully in my forthcoming article: “‘The Christmas Tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers’: Spectacle, Emotion and Patriotism in the Early Third Republic,” *French Historical Studies*.

³³ Risler, “L’Association Générale d’Alsace-Lorraine,” 54. On Risler’s role, see Siebecker, *Poésies d’un Vaincu*, 276. The Christmas tree event in Lyon in 1872 was also couched as a patriotic and Republican event. See Schnéégans, *Souvenir de L’Arbre de Noël*, esp. 9-10.

³⁴ Recent works on Gambetta include Foley and Sowerwine, *A Political Romance*; Grévy, *La République des Opportunistes*; Mayeur, *Léon Gambetta*; Barral, *Léon Gambetta*.

³⁵ Grévy, *La République des Opportunistes*, 139-40.

³⁶ Jules Claretie in *Le Temps*, reproduced in *Revue alsacienne*, Jan. 1882: 134-5.

³⁷ See the introduction and note 2 above.

³⁸ For instance, Mmes Floquet, Scheurer-Kestner and Ferry. Committee members’ names were often reported in the newspapers. The original committee members (including five who were wives of republican politicians) are listed in Siebecker, *Poésies d’un Vaincu*, 264-5. See also Grévy, *La République des Opportunistes*, 139.

³⁹ *Revue alsacienne*, Jan. 1881: 131.

From the 1890s, the President of the Republic regularly sent a representative.⁴⁰ Ministers of the government were typically represented each year as well.⁴¹ The Government's representation was an important sign of official recognition of the event.

Official financial support was another sign of republican attachment to the *Association générale d'Alsace-Lorraine* and its activities. The *Mobilier national* (the State property office, responsible for public buildings) began to decorate the venue of the Christmas tree event in the 1880s,⁴² while general and municipal councils began to subscribe to AGAL. In 1882, the annual report of the Association listed in its finances a subsidy of 7,000 francs from the General Council of the Seine, and noted that "106 municipal councils of France" were included amongst its 1,245 members. The report continued:

The Commission for *Alsaciens-Lorrains* in the Ministry of the Interior, the municipal council of Paris, the General Council of the Seine, general and municipal councils of the departments, a large number of educational establishments, and diverse associations have supported the Society, by large subventions or by the creation of scholarships for young *Alsaciens-Lorrains*.⁴³

By 1887, the number of municipal authorities ("towns, communes or general councils") supporting the Association had risen to 740, and in 1890 the figure reached 1,200.⁴⁴ Its quasi-official status was by now beyond question.

A Philanthropic Icon

While the "Christmas tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers" was originally an occasion to provide aid to needy immigrant children as part of the republicans' patriotic endeavor, the symbolic significance of the tree at the heart of the event gradually expanded. Over time, this spectacular visual symbol, which attracted the crowds and inspired them to donate, became an emblem representing generosity to all the needy in the festive season. In this symbolic incarnation, the Christmas tree tapped into French philanthropic traditions, and its broad appeal was widely utilized by philanthropic institutions and charitable organizations to aid their work in the community.

By the 1880s, the endemic poverty exacerbated by economic downturn and accelerating industrialization was a cause of widespread concern.⁴⁵ The precariousness of workers' lives in the new industrial economy was apparent to all, as was their preparedness to organize and take action to improve their lot. Republicans were divided on how to address "the social question": how to alleviate workers' suffering and prevent militant or revolutionary action on their part.⁴⁶ The notion of social entitlements enshrined in national legislation was hotly contested: only maternal and child welfare measures drew broad support across all political groupings.⁴⁷ But a

⁴⁰ The newspapers noted the presence of representatives of the President in 1894 (Casimir-Périer), 1895-8 (Faure), 1900-02 (Loubet), 1906, 1910 and 1911 (Fallières) and 1913 (Poincaré). It is likely that presidential representatives attended in the other years as well, even if their presence did not feature in the newspaper reports.

⁴¹ *Le Petit Parisien*, Dec. 27, 1900; *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 25, 1902.

⁴² See *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 27, 1883, Dec. 27, 1884, Dec. 27, 1886, Dec. 27, 1887; *Le Petit Parisien*, Dec. 27, 1887, Dec. 27, 1891, etc.

⁴³ Annual report, quoted in *Revue alsacienne*, April 1882: 277-8.

⁴⁴ Annual reports of AGAL, quoted in *Revue alsacienne*, April 1887: 282-3; 13^e année (1890): 221.

⁴⁵ Zeldin, *Ambition, Love and Politics*, 642-5; Elwitt, *The Third Republic Defended*, 3-7; Stone, *The Search for Social Peace*, 58-60.

⁴⁶ Stone, *The Search for Social Peace*, 161-2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 58-9; Fuchs, *Abandoned Children*; Fuchs, "The Right to Life. Paul Strauss and the Politics of Motherhood," 82-105; Accampo, "Gender, Social Policy, and the Formation of the Third Republic," 1-27.

well-established French tradition of partnership between private philanthropy and State-provided assistance continued to mark the provision of welfare.⁴⁸ The “Christmas tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers,” a private initiative subsidized by the State, sat comfortably within that tradition. So did the array of Christmas tree events that proliferated from the 1880s as the symbolic work of the Christmas tree expanded.

Fragmentary evidence suggests that Christmas tree events modeled on the “Christmas Tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers” made their appearance from the mid-1870s, and that Ministers of the government were called upon to preside and even to provide gifts, as William Waddington did at La Ferté-Milon.⁴⁹ Those at the very pinnacle of the republican establishment thus led the way in transforming the Christmas tree into a focal point of republican philanthropy. In some instances, the Christmas tree laden with gifts for children was an extension of the custom of distributing *étrennes* (tips or gratuities) to staff and subordinates at New Year. When Charles Floquet was President of the Chamber of Deputies in 1885, Hortense Kestner, his wife (who was raised in a leading Alsatian republican family and was a stalwart of the Ladies’ Committee of AGAL for many years) hosted a Christmas tree for the children of staff of the Palais Bourbon, where the Chamber held its sessions.⁵⁰ Madame Deschanel would “revive the tradition” (as *Le Petit Parisien* put it) when her husband, Paul Deschanel, was President of the Chamber in 1901.⁵¹

Republican Presidents and their wives began to utilize the Christmas tree, not just to reward their household staff, but also to emphasize the role of the Republic as benefactor of the poor. During celebrations for the centenary of the French Revolution in 1889, Cécile Carnot (wife of President Sadi Carnot) installed ten Christmas trees in the Salle des Fêtes at the Élysée Palace, and bussed in 400 needy children—ten boys and ten girls from each of the twenty *arrondissements* of Paris—to receive gifts.⁵² (Fig. 4)



Figure 4 *Le Petit Parisien: Supplément littéraire illustré*, “L’Arbre de Noël à la Présidence de la République” (Dec. 29, 1889). <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k8303178/f8.item>

⁴⁸ Beaudoin, ““Without Belonging to the Public Service:”” 671-99; Weiss, “Origins of the French Welfare State,” 47-78.

⁴⁹ See Waddington, *My First Years as a French Woman*, 223-4, quoted in Perrot, *Le Cadeau de Noël*, 31. Waddington does not give the year. Perrot notes: “Son époux, William Waddington, allait sans doute participer à un de ces ‘arbres de Noël’ officiels, ici à la Ferté-Milon, en tant que ministre.” (*Le Cadeau de Noël*, 154-5, my emphasis).

⁵⁰ *Revue alsacienne*, Jan. 1886: 133.

⁵¹ *Le Petit Parisien*, Dec. 26, 1901.

⁵² *Revue alsacienne*, Jan. 1886: 133; *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 27, 1889.

Other Presidents followed suit, Raymond Poincaré's elaborate event at the Trocadéro in 1913, in aid of the municipal schools of the City of Paris, receiving wide publicity. (Fig. 5) According to one report, "the children rose, turned towards the head of State, extended their thousands of tiny hands to applaud him, and shouted loudly, 'Thank you! Thank you! Long live Poincaré!'"⁵³ Over time, the "Christmas tree of the Élysée" became an annual event, which continues today.⁵⁴



Figure 5 "Christmas tree hosted by President Poincaré, Trocadéro" (December 24, 1913). Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, EST EI-13 (324). <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b69282240.r=L%27arbre%20de%20No%3%ABl?rk=472105;2>

If such gestures replicated longstanding traditions of charity, the republicans in power gave those traditions a specifically republican twist by linking assistance to the mutualist and solidarist principles espoused by the republican movement since at least 1848.⁵⁵ These principles were particularly strong amongst the Radical republicans, a major faction within the republican movement. Solidarity, the republicans asserted, was the implementation of fraternity, and it was brought to life in "mutualist" organizations.⁵⁶ An array of such organizations—life insurance, medical and pharmaceutical services, funeral schemes, pension schemes and savings banks—flourished from the 1890s.⁵⁷ For many of these organizations, holding a Christmas tree event not only gave pleasure to children and demonstrated the benefits and achievements of mutualism, but also enacted this new vision of republican "fraternity."

⁵³ *Le Petit Parisien*, Dec. 25, 1913; also reported in *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 25, 1913.

⁵⁴ See https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arbre_de_Noël_de_l'Élysée/ (accessed August 30, 2016). The event was not held during the Occupation.

⁵⁵ Nord, "The Welfare State in France, 1870-1914," 827.

⁵⁶ Mona Ozouf, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," 108-10.

⁵⁷ For good summaries, see Zeldin, *Ambition, Love and Politics*, 660-65; Elwitt, *The Third Republic Defended*, 203-16.

The Alsatians and Lorrainers themselves were quick to embrace mutualism. In 1872, those in Paris established a *Société de Prévoyance et de Secours Mutuels des Alsaciens-Lorrains* to provide pensions for the elderly. The following year, the *Société de Secours Mutuels des Alsaciens-Lorrains* began to assist its members to find employment, as well as to pay medical costs and funeral expenses. These associations came together around AGAL's Christmas tree, as well as at other events marking their regional identities.⁵⁸

Christmas tree events also provided a popular means for other mutual organizations to distribute benefits to their members. Organizations of migrants from Brittany and from Switzerland did so,⁵⁹ as did the "Employees' League" of the City of Paris Customs service; the painters' union; the policemen, gendarmes and firemen of Asnières; and the Federation of Mutual societies of Kremlin-Bicêtre.⁶⁰ The *Prévoyants de l'avenir*, a pension fund with 151,000 members by 1892, held Christmas trees for its orphans.⁶¹ So did the organization of employees of the banks and the stock exchange, and the Prefecture of Police.⁶² Employers often preferred to encourage such endeavors rather than to support social welfare legislation.⁶³ For instance, representatives of the Board of Directors regularly attended the Christmas tree festivities organized by the "Providential Fund of employees and workers" of the Paris *Métro* from 1904. This event brought together "the great *Métropolitain* family,"⁶⁴ and the Director's wife distributed sweets to the children on occasion.⁶⁵

In republican hands, Christmas tree events became occasions for encouraging parents, and through them their children, to embrace "mutualism" and "social solidarity." Senator Paul Strauss, a Radical and a leading exponent of Solidarism who wrote several books on the social question, "explained the benefits of mutualism" at a Christmas tree function at Levallois-Perret in 1904.⁶⁶ In 1905, it was the turn of Deputy Paul Deschanel, formerly President of the Chamber, to speak on "Mutualism and the manner in which it should be practiced." According to the *Petit Journal*, "He addressed parents anxious about the future of their children and encouraged them to introduce [those children] into the great mutualist family which would turn them into citizens useful to their country."⁶⁷

The desire to encourage mutualist ideas, as well as to inculcate good habits in the poor, explains the expanding practice of distributing savings bank accounts, containing five or ten francs, to deserving children at Christmas tree functions from the 1880s. AGAL first distributed such accounts in 1886, thanks to a private donation for that purpose.⁶⁸ So widespread was support for mutualism, and so deeply rooted French support for Alsace and Lorraine, that in 1892 the French community in San Francisco donated funds for fifty-three savings accounts

⁵⁸ AGAL, *Paris 1871-1996*, 33-4. Branches of these mutual societies, or similar organizations, also existed in Lyon: the *Société de Secours Mutuels Alsacienne et Lorraine* (of which M. Schnéegans was President) and the *Société de Secours d'Alsace-Lorraine*. See Schnéegans, *Souvenir de l'Arbre de Noël*, 3,6.

⁵⁹ *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 26, 1913 (Meuse); Dec. 26, 1897, Dec. 28, 1907, Dec. 26, 1913 (*Société Suisse de secours*); *Le Petit Parisien*, Dec. 25, 1911, Dec. 26, 1912, Dec. 26, 1913 (*Les Petits Bretons* and *La Mutualité Bretonne*).

⁶⁰ *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 26, 1898; Dec. 26, 1908, Dec. 26, 1910, Dec. 26, 1912.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Dec. 26, 1908, Dec. 26, 1909. The 1909 event was described as the seventh, but there appear to be no reports on the earlier ones. On this organization, see Jean Jaurès, "Les Prévoyants de l'Avenir," *La Dépêche*, 23 mars 1892, in *Cahiers Jaurès*, available at <http://www.jaures.info/dossiers> (accessed August 18, 2016).

⁶² *Le Petit Parisien*, Dec. 26, 1912, Dec. 26, 1913, Dec. 25, 1907.

⁶³ See Stone, *The Search for Social Peace*, 170-74.

⁶⁴ *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 26, 1904,

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Dec. 26, 1907, Dec. 26, 1908, Dec. 25, 1911, Dec. 26, 1912; *Le Petit Parisien*, Dec. 25, 1911, Dec. 26, 1912.

⁶⁶ *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 26, 1904. On Strauss, see Fuchs, "The Right to Life," 82-105.

⁶⁷ *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 25, 1905.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Dec. 27, 1896.

for emigrant children, and ten for scholarship-holders supported by AGAL.⁶⁹ Saving accounts were regularly distributed to orphans of the sixteenth arrondissement and to the “most deserving” orphans at Varennes,⁷⁰ while in the ninth arrondissement up to three hundred savings accounts were allocated by lottery each year.⁷¹

The career of Deputy Georges Berry underlines the broad reach of mutualist ideas by the early twentieth century. Originally a monarchist who “rallied” to the Republic, he remained a man of the Right, an ardent Nationalist, an opponent of Big Business and Organized Labor. He was a staunch opponent of the Radicals’ agenda, particularly their attempt to legislate an income tax and a compulsory weekly rest day for workers.⁷² Berry headed several philanthropic organizations and hosted a Christmas tree event in his constituency in the ninth arrondissement of Paris each year from 1897. Attracted by a philosophy of “self-help” for the poor, he advised the children receiving gifts at the event in 1908 to “put into practice [later in life] the solidarity practiced towards them and their parents today.”⁷³

If mutualism represented an attempt to reduce the impact of poverty, local authorities remained, as they had long been, the main providers of public assistance to the poor in their communities.⁷⁴ Mayors of towns and villages began to adopt the Christmas tree, emblem of the fraternal values of the Republic they represented, to help support the schools, nursery schools and crèches for which they were responsible.⁷⁵ Some mayors, moreover, were keen mutualists. Léon Robelin, Mayor of Longjumeau, who presided over a Christmas tree for children at his local school in 1903, was active in mutualist circles and would later sit on the Commission charged with developing a law on Social Insurance.⁷⁶ Likewise Auguste Goust, mayor of Mantes and Deputy for Seine-et-Oise, who officiated at a similar event for the nursery school at Mantes in 1913, was committed to fostering social insurance measures, mutual aid and “social solidarity.”⁷⁷

Goust simultaneously occupied positions in national and municipal politics, but it was not unusual for national and local officials to co-operate in hosting Christmas tree festivities, as they had long co-operated to provide relief to the poor. Deputy Georges Berry hosted his annual Christmas tree in conjunction with the municipal council of the ninth arrondissement (Fig. 6). Similarly, the Prefect of Eure-et-Loire, the Mayor of Chartres, and the Deputies of the region jointly hosted a Christmas tree for more than a thousand children at Chartres in 1907.⁷⁸

⁶⁹ *Le Petit Parisien*, Dec. 26, 1892; *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 26, 1892.

⁷⁰ *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 26, 1900, Dec. 26, 1902, Dec. 26, 1904, Dec. 26, 1911.

⁷¹ For instance, *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 26, 1897, Dec. 26, 1899, Dec. 26, 1900, Dec. 25, 1905, Dec. 26, 1908, Dec. 25, 1909.

⁷² Nord, *Paris Shopkeepers and the Politics of Resentment*, 358-9, 418 and *passim*; Stone, *The Search for Social Peace*, 38, 176; “Base des Données des Députés français depuis 1789,” available at [http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/sycomore/fiche/\(num_dept\)/715](http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/sycomore/fiche/(num_dept)/715); Profession de foi de Georges Berry, in *Chambre des Députés, Impressions: Projets de lois, propositions, rapports, etc.* (Paris, 1914), 1025.

⁷³ *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 26, 1908.

⁷⁴ Weiss, “Origins of the Welfare State”; Beaudoin, ““Without Belonging to the Public Service””; Smith, *Creating the Welfare State in France*, 15.

⁷⁵ For example, *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 26, 1898 (Bourg-la-Reine); *Le Petit Parisien*, Dec. 25, 1907 (La Ferté-sous-Jouarre); *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 26, 1910 (Issy-les-Moulineaux).

⁷⁶ “Robelin, Léon,” at <http://www.musee.mutualite.fr/musee/musee-mutualite.nsf/> (accessed September 2, 2016).

⁷⁷ “Base des Données des Députés français depuis 1789,” available at [http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/sycomore/fiche/\(num_dept\)/3519](http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/sycomore/fiche/(num_dept)/3519). Profession de foi d’Auguste Goust, élections législatives de 1914, in *Impressions: Projets de lois*, 1150-53; *Le Petit Parisien*, Dec. 26, 1913.

⁷⁸ *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 28, 1907.



Figure 6 “Arbre de Noël du Quartier Rochechouart” ([9th arron.], Dec. 30, 1911).
Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, EST EI-13 (127).
<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b69200079.r=L%27arbre%20de%20No%C3%ABI?rk=278971;2>

Private philanthropic organizations, too, adopted the Christmas tree as a focus of Christmas charity by the turn of the twentieth century. The Department of the Seine alone boasted 3, 227 private charities by 1897.⁷⁹ Newspapers reported a multitude of Christmas tree events hosted by these organizations to aid their educational works, hospitals, hospices, orphanages, and services for the blind.⁸⁰ Reporting on the “numerous ceremonies” held by “charitable societies” on Christmas day in 1900, the *Petit Journal* observed: “Just like last Sunday, many Christmas trees brought together around their branches the poor children of different neighborhoods, since public or private philanthropy [*bienfaisance*] happily intervenes to bring a little joy to all at Christmas time.”⁸¹

That Christmas tree events appealed to republican-aligned charitable societies is not surprising, given the republican pedigree of the Christmas tree in France. Dr. Léon Dufour’s *Goutte de Lait*, for instance, which held Christmas tree events in the working-class Parisian suburb of Belleville in 1911 and 1912, sought to promote “solidarity between the classes” by supplying pasteurized milk and clean babies’ bottles to working mothers.⁸²

But some Catholic charities were also adopting the Christmas tree by the early twentieth century. The *Mie de Pain*, established by Paulin Enfert to provide food, clothing and medical care to the poor of the thirteenth arrondissement, held a Christmas tree event in 1904, as did a Catholic charity running night shelters for homeless men, the *Œuvre de l’Hospitalité de Nuit*.⁸³ The workers’ garden movement, established by Abbé Lemire, long-serving Deputy for the

⁷⁹ Smith, *Creating the Welfare State*, 18.

⁸⁰ For example, *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 27, 1897 (Brest); Dec. 26, 1898 (Juvisy-sur-Orge); *Le Petit Parisien*, Dec. 25, 1904 (Paris)..

⁸¹ *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 26, 1900.

⁸² *Le Petit Parisien*, Dec. 25, 1911; Dec. 26, 1912. On Dufour, see Sautereau, “Aux origines de la pédiatrie moderne: 217-33.

⁸³ *Le Petit Parisien*, Dec. 25, 1904. The “Mie de Pain” still exists. See www.miedepain.asso.fr/notre-histoire/ (accessed September 10, 2016). On the Christian connotations of fraternity and republican responses to them, see Ozouf, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,” 109-110.

Nord, hosted Christmas trees for its members in 1910 and 1911.⁸⁴ These private organizations, too, collaborated with officials at all levels of government. They held their Christmas tree celebrations in town halls and Prefectures, often with the local Deputy, the Mayor and municipal councilors in attendance.⁸⁵

The Christmas tree, a dramatic and spectacular visual symbol of seasonal generosity, was thus incorporated into established French practices of philanthropic co-operation between State officials and private benefactors. Steven Beaudoin has shown how wealthy Catholics, Protestants, Jews and republicans co-operated to fulfill their duties to the poor of Bordeaux under the Third Republic, subsuming their political differences.⁸⁶ Accounts of Christmas tree events in the Paris region in the period to World War I demonstrate similar patterns of co-operation. All were keen to be seen to be addressing poverty, and the illuminated tree was a glittering and very public demonstration of that objective.

“Christmas trees have been erected more or less everywhere,” reported the *Petit Journal* in 1903. “Almost every arrondissement has its own ... we can list only a few of these children’s festivals.”⁸⁷ By this time, both *Le Petit Journal* and *Le Petit Parisien* carried lists of Christmas tree events that often covered several columns.⁸⁸ The Christmas tree had become commonplace, and newspapers searching for novelty delighted in the oddest of its deployments: the tree installed in the restaurant car of the Nord Express that amazed onlookers as it sped from Paris to St. Petersburg in 1903; the Christmas trees for cats and dogs reportedly all the rage in New York in 1908.⁸⁹

The outbreak of war in 1914 brought new causes to be aided around a Christmas tree, and new constituencies whose lives could be brightened by the tree’s glowing lights. On December 25 that year, the “Christmas tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers” was one of ten trees held in Paris to benefit those from the occupied and war-affected regions, as well as poor Parisians. Some of these events had the official imprimatur, in that government officials attended. For instance, Marcel Sembat, Minister for Public Works, attended a Christmas tree organized by the national union of train drivers for the children of Belgian and French train drivers from the occupied areas.⁹⁰ Other events were simply community endeavors, like that hosted by the Committee of the People’s Soup Kitchen of Clignancourt, or the tree for the children of men from the eighteenth arrondissement who had been called up.⁹¹ In such cases, the Christmas tree was a focal point for the community’s war effort, and reflected the original purpose of the “Christmas tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers” in healing a suffering community. Meanwhile, the Red Cross installed “a gigantic Christmas tree” in a northern military post for soldiers heading to the front.⁹² By Christmas 1914, the tree, far from being the “foreign” object it was in 1872, had become sufficiently French to devote its fraternal potential to the national war effort.

⁸⁴ *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 6, 1910; Dec. 26, 1911. Jules Lemire, a Christian Democrat and republican, was silenced by the Church in 1910 for his “liberal” political activities. See “Base des Données des Députés français depuis 1789”, available at http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/sycomore/fiche/%28num_dept%29/7752. Profession de foi de M. Lemire, élections législatives de 1914, in *Impressions: Projets de lois*, 761; Jean-Marie Mayeur, *L’Abbé Lemire (1853-1928): un prêtre démocrate* (Paris-Tournai, 1968), esp. 261, 266-7, 419-22.

⁸⁵ *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 26, 1900 (16th arron.); *Le Petit Parisien*, Dec. 25, 1905 (3rd arron.); *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 26, 1911 (14th arron.); *Le Petit Parisien*, Dec. 26, 1913 (14th arron.); *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 26, 1909 (St-Maur).

⁸⁶ Beaudoin, “Without Belonging to the Public Service.”

⁸⁷ *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 26, 1903.

⁸⁸ For example, *Le Petit Journal*, “Les Arbres de Noël,” Dec. 25, 1904; Dec. 26, 1908; *Le Petit Parisien*, Dec. 25, 1907, Dec. 25, 1911, Dec. 26, 1913.

⁸⁹ *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 25, 1903; Dec. 26, 1908.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, Dec. 25 and Dec. 26, 1914.

⁹¹ *Le Petit Parisien*, Dec. 25, 1914.

⁹² *Le Petit Journal*, Dec. 25 and Dec. 26, 1914.

Conclusion

The annual “Christmas tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers” began as a popular celebration of patriotism in which the Parisian community mourned the Lost Provinces and joined refugees and republican leaders in keeping alive the dream of recovering them for France. The Lost Provinces were evoked at the ceremony by the columns of refugee children receiving seasonal aid, as well as by the Christmas tree: a powerful emblem of Alsace. Given the wide reporting of this event, the “Christmas tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers” familiarized the French populace with an object that, outside elite circles, had thus far been largely a foreign curiosity.

From its patriotic origins, the Christmas tree gradually acquired additional cultural meaning as a symbol of philanthropy. The distribution of aid that was central to the Alsatian-Lorrainer Christmas tree event built on established traditions of welfare provision. But the Christmas tree became, for republicans, a signifier of fraternity, a symbol that a beneficent Republic was sympathetic to the suffering of the needy. Moreover, as a symbol of philanthropy and seasonal generosity, the Christmas tree attracted many who sought to aid the poor, even if they were not professed republicans.

Between 1872 and 1914, the tree gradually became a central feature of public Christmas festivities in France. There is some evidence to suggest that its domestic adoption was inspired by the now-familiar Alsatian-Lorrainer tree: the advertising posters for the department stores that began, from about the 1890s, to show happy French bourgeois children around Christmas trees in domestic scenes, sometimes deployed Alsatian themes.⁹³ (Fig. 7) At the very least, the Alsatian-Lorrainer Christmas tree event took any “German” taint from the Christmas tree and legitimized it as French.

That the Christmas tree entered Christmas festivities in France as part of a public ritual, and only later as a regular part of domestic Christmas celebrations, stands in marked contrast to the process elsewhere. In Germany, for instance, the role of the Christmas tree in Protestant family ritual made it a cultural signifier of “German-ness” for many. This allowed the tree to be deployed to unify the diverse peoples of the region in a Protestant-dominated German Empire under Prussian leadership after 1870.⁹⁴

Similarly, the Christmas tree acquired a nation-building role in nineteenth-century America on the basis of its implantation in domestic ritual. Educating new immigrants from southern Europe on the customs surrounding the American Christmas tree was part of their induction into “American-ness,” while the spread of the Christmas tree helped break down sectional and regional differences in American society.⁹⁵

⁹³ An Alsatian-themed advertisement for the *Nouvelles Galeries Parisiennes* at Poitiers, 1914, can be viewed at: <http://www.lanouvellerepublique.fr/Vienne/Communautes-NR/n/Contenus/Articles/2014/01/03/Les-etrennes-de-1914-1744708>

⁹⁴ Perry, *Christmas in Germany*, esp. 53-9.

⁹⁵ Marling, *Merry Christmas!*, 177-80.



Figure 7 “Jouets, étrennes; famille autour d’un arbre de Noël” (c. 1891). Bibliothèque nationale de France, ENT DN-1 (CAMIS/5)-ROUL. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9014996t.r=L%27arbre%20de%20No%20C3%AB1?rk=364808;4>

By the First World War, the now-familiar Christmas tree had been adopted by a broad array of organizations and individuals in France to represent, if not shared approaches to “the social question,” at least shared aspirations to redress social disadvantage. Familiar and popular, the tree continued to feature in public festivities in France long after 1918 when, with the return of the Lost Provinces to France, the “Christmas tree of the Alsatians and Lorrainers” lost its original *raison d’être*.

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