CHAPTER 2

War, Occupation, and Entanglements

German Perspectives on the Napoleonic Era

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Introduction

When did the nineteenth century begin? Did it begin with Napoleon? This chapter considers Franco-German history around 1800. While briefly referring to aspects of that history before the French Revolution and also after the Napoleonic era, the main focus is on the Napoleonic Wars, on perceptions and experiences of them. The Franco-German relationship between 1800 and 1815 was largely asymmetrical due to Napoleon's military victories, the annexation of German territories to France, and the transfer of French administrative, legal, and constitutional systems to parts of Germany. Thus, the focus here is on “Germanies and Napoleonic France” rather than “France and Germany” so as to stress French domination over the German territories.

The concept of a pluralistic Germany is relevant because the historiography of Franco-German relations during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras has largely focused on Prussia. This has resulted in a master narrative of German history centered on the Hohenzollern kingdom and—in a teleological way—on the Prussian-led German Empire of 1871. Key elements of this Prussocentric master narrative are nation- and state-building, modernization, and nationalism. This concentration on Prussia has entailed simplification of a far more complex Franco-German relationship. The decision to focus primarily on the Third Germany, that is, those areas belonging neither to Prussia nor to Austria, is justified because parts of this Dritte Deutschland were annexed to France or integrated
into the Confederation of the Rhine. This was therefore the region of the most intensive French-German entanglement around 1800.

From the perspective of rather ordinary contemporaries such as German travelers along with the insights of recent research on the experience of war, it will be argued that the categories in most late nineteenth- and even twentieth-century master narratives of German history, such as the (Prussian-led) nation-state and nationalism, hardly played a role in the perceptions of contemporaries. It was instead the case that the nation, the idea of national borders, and, above all, the image of a national enemy were mainly the result of the politics of memory and literary discourse in the aftermath of the Napoleonic era.

Within Franco-German history between 1800 and 1815, we will give preference to the notion of “entanglement.” In addition to containing the notion of transfer, entanglement has a twofold meaning. First, transfer often concentrates on agents of transfer processes, on media, or on single objects, while entanglement stresses an intensified period of mutual perceptions and exchange processes on various levels, such as the legal system, administration, constitutions, or objets d’art. Second, this exchange between France and the German states around 1800 was largely driven by war and occupation, as well as by resistance to some extent. This is yet another difference from the concept of transfer, which is mainly based on the assumption of voluntary and peaceful relations between regions and their willingness to receive foreign goods.¹ There is yet another reason to prefer the notion of entanglement: both the comparative approach and the analysis of cultural transfer most often refer to a national framework—even though this is exactly what is questioned by the notion of transfer. In this case, the national framework would be a clear-cut Franco-German history in which both entities are distinctly separated by national borders.

From Borderland to National Frontier

Since the mid-seventeenth century, France had been one of the main travel destinations for Germans. Especially from the 1770s onward, the Bourbon monarchy and, above all, its centers, Paris and Versailles, attracted many German visitors.² Conversely, Germany was much less attractive for the French. Even during the French Wars between 1792 and 1814, there was a constant stream of German visitors toward France and intense production of German travel writing on the country.³ One of the most common routes for entering France was through Baden via Kehl on the east bank of the Rhine. Before the revolution, the river itself was the border that had to be crossed before entering France. The route in Baden, the first stop in France at Strasbourg, and the continuing journey through Alsace and Lorraine toward either Paris or the southern parts of the country were described by many travelers.⁴

One such traveler was Johann Friedrich Carl Grimm, a physician from Saxony, who visited France in 1773. In his travelogue, he described the regions and different German states he traversed in great detail, focusing on the gradual change in manners, costumes, language, architecture, and agriculture. When he