CHAPTER 5

Traditions of Hate among the Intellectual Elite

The Case of Treitschke and Bainville

Hugo Frey and Stefan Jordan

The historical profession has made the international rivalry between France and Germany in the modern period into a *locus classicus* of scholarship. Recently it is cultural historians who have contributed the most to new thinking on Franco-German enmity. Their best work illustrates how crossnational hatreds were a prominent part of everyday life in both of the states.¹ Demography, industry, cuisine, and children’s literature were all vectors for the public expression of Francophobia and Germanophobia. Among the elite, geographers, anthropologists, and historians provided detailed studies that “proved” the ownership of the disputed territory of Alsace-Lorraine for their nation-state.² Some historians, like Jules Michelet and Ernest Renan, were themselves popular national heroes. To illustrate and to analyze the apogee of Franco-German enmity via the means of a short case study we will compare and contrast the writings of the historians: Heinrich von Treitschke (1834–86) and Jacques Bainville (1879–1936).

Both writers discussed in this chapter are notorious. The German, Treitschke, was professor of history at the University of Berlin, and his thinking is often cited as a significant precursor to Nazism.³ This profile as a reactionary was not lost on Treitschke’s contemporaries. During the First World War, Allied intellectuals, including Emile Durkheim, identified him as a significant cause of bellicosity.⁴ After 1945 it was political philosophers who returned to Treitschke to establish the roots of Nazism.⁵ Jacques Bainville is no less central a figure from the European extreme right-wing. He was an enthusiastic member of the royalist movement *Action française*, and he wrote extensively for this movement’s newspaper.
of the same title. Bainville researched and lectured on the German threat to French security. This subject became his obsession and he published volumes on it from the eve of the First World War to his death (1936).6

We will analyze two publications in particular: Treitschke’s Was fordern wir von Frankreich? (1870) and Bainville’s Histoire de Deux Peuples (1915).7 These are classics that have been overlooked in recent years by historians despite the fact that they were once influential and bestselling publications. An analysis of these texts illustrates the heart of Francophobia and Germanophobia. Treitschke’s and Bainville’s visions of the other’s nation function as a mirror image. The positions the historians expressed in their writings blur into a common xenophobia. Similarly, Treitschke’s and Bainville’s attitudes toward social revolution (1789) closely resemble one another. We will also pinpoint a common anti-Semitism that colors the writers’ thinking. In addition, there are links to be made in the historians’ attitude to the idea of power. For here, too, the historians shared attitudes. However, we underline that not everything was mirrored. Notably, Treitschke’s and Bainville’s thinking on religion and race is dissimilar. Certainly, the comparative approach we adopt is not without its risks. For instance, some readers might object that Treitschke and Bainville were of different generations or were writing for different readerships. However, as we will explain, the older man, Treitschke, directly influenced the younger one. Similarly, while not holding a chair in history at a French university, Bainville was appointed to the Académie Française in 1935. As Eugen Weber noted in his famous work on the Action française, the royalist historian proved influential beyond the limited circles of extreme right-wing clubs and so he was in that respect held in comparable, albeit necessarily different, public esteem to Professor Treitschke in Germany.8 In any case, our selection to compare these two opinion formers is based neither on the rigorous methods of comparative biography nor on the narrative prescriptions, which are perhaps associated with the writing of a history of History as scientific discipline. Our modest aim is to analyze the contribution of these men when they were important actors in the nationalist feud that intermittently raged between France and Germany.

Treitschke’s imaginary France presented in Was fordern wir von Frankreich? (1870) is a pitiful place. He suggests that the country is inhabited by savages. For Treitschke the French are “half educated barbarians”; they are “wild beasts.” He teaches that the French are a “reckless” and “frivolous people” who have become too arrogant to be ignored by their peaceful German neighbors. Treitschke contends that the Revolution of 1789 created a centralizing state that encouraged a “domineering national spirit” in France that was disproportionate to the true strength of these weak people. Notably, Treitschke uses the common pejorative term Welsch to describe all non-Germans who are living to the west of the Vosges Mountains.9 Treitschke’s only praise for France is offered toward its German speaking citizens of Alsace. He explains that these soldiers, albeit now serving in the French army, are the strongest and most honorable people. He promises that in the Vosges Mountains the German visitor glimpses healthy men with German “blood,” even if they can only speak the French language.10