FRANCE GERMANY 1870-1871
WAR, COMMUNE AND MEMORIES
EXHIBITION BOOKLET
The 1870–1871 war was the founding event that set the tone for Franco-German relations and paved the way for Europe’s future path. It effectively put an end to the diplomacy-centred balance of power known as the Concert of Europe, as well as the ‘repose of Europe’, ideas that did not resurface, in a different form, until the post-1945 period.

The conflict pitted France, a country that had spent several centuries building and consolidating its unity across a succession of political regimes, against Germany, a nation as yet unformed, comprising a collection of more recently emerged states.

In France, despite the proclamation of the Republic, pre-existing social tensions and the patriotic fervour triggered by Napoleon’s defeat led to the Paris Commune and the outbreak of civil war. In Germany, victory served to unify the country, symbolised by the proclamation of the Empire in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. A huge diversity and multiplicity of memories of the war exist on both sides, French and German, from official and personal sources. These recollections give us invaluable insights into the conflict’s lasting impact on European societies.

The chronology of these events should be placed within a long-term context that reveals their true span and origins, reaching back to 1864, a year that marked the start of the German unification wars, and 1875, which saw the ‘War in Sight’ (Krieg in Sicht) crisis; their span stretches from the Wars of Liberation (1813–1815) and Congress of Vienna (1815) to the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, which brought World War I to a close.
FRANCE AND THE GERMAN STATES:
THE PATH FROM THE PEACE TO WAR

The Prussian Empire, vying with the Austrian Empire for supremacy over Germany, was becoming steadily more powerful, a rise that seemed unstoppable once Otto von Bismarck took office in 1862. German unification, with Prussia at its heart, began with the war against Denmark, known as the War of the Duchies (1864–1865), and continued with the 1866 Austro-Prussian War (Deutscher Krieg – German War). Prussia emerged as the victor of the 1866 conflict, thus compromising an Austro-centric German unification (großdeutsche Lösung – greater German solution) and leading to the creation of the North German Confederation (kleindeutsche Lösung – little German solution) in 1867.

In France, the Second Empire was facing particularly forceful opposition, both political and social, even with the introduction of a series of reforms designed to liberalise the regime, and efforts to bring about military reforms failed. An ambitious but ambiguous foreign policy cost a great many lives in Crimea and Italy, proved risky in Mexico, and combined with several diplomatic setbacks in the power struggle with Prussia served to further isolate and weaken the Empire. Despite the unfavourable situation, the ailing Napoleon III listened to the assurances of his General Staff and yielded to warmongering elements, declaring war on Prussia on 19 July 1870.
THE TWO PHASES OF THE WAR

The first month of the conflict was marked by a number of episodes that conditioned the memories of the warring parties: the Reichshoffen charge, the high casualty rate of the battle of Gravelotte, the battle of Sedan, a disaster or triumph depending on the point of view. Both sides were surprised: the Germans by the rapidity of their victories and the collapse of the imperial army, the French by the speed of the German invasion and the relentless series of defeats.

Napoleon III’s surrender resulted in the fall of the Second Empire and the forming of the Government of National Defence (4 September 1870), which decided to pursue the war. The Prussian General Staff then proceeded to lay siege to Paris and bombarded the city to force the government to surrender and end the war.

In a quest to liberate Paris, the Republic mobilised additional forces from the rest of the country, calling on battalions from the Mobile National Guard, volunteers and francs-tireurs. Nevertheless, despite a powerful surge of patriotism, the lack of officers, equipment and adequate military training meant that the National Defence armies failed to turn the tide of the war.
The 1870–1871 war is usually seen as a 19th-century conflict, symbolised by the ‘pointless’ charges of the Cuirassiers in their gleaming uniforms. The reality was in fact far bleaker, and far more modern. The war was waged very differently by the Germans, who were attacked but did not fight on their own territory, and the French, whose civilian population was directly affected by the fighting. Each army condemned the other for its brutality, embodied for the Germans by the francs-tireurs and ‘turcos’ – the nickname given to the Algerian skirmishers – and for the French by the uhlans (unit of German lancers) and plunderers.

Phenomena and sights associated in collective memory with the conflicts that marked the 20th century emerged during this war. Strasbourg, Belfort and Paris came under bombardment and were partially destroyed as civilians hid in their cellars. The atrocities perpetrated against civilian populations were publicised by the press and influenced public opinion in other countries. The number of French prisoners was far higher than the Prussian General Staff’s predictions in terms of the human and material resources needed to deal with them. In addition, France suffered the invasion of a third of its territory during the war, remaining partially occupied until it paid the war indemnity in full, in September 1873.
THE ARMISTICE AND THE COMMUNE

By late January 1871, France was no longer capable of waging war. On 26 January, the armistice was signed and immediately applied. It demanded that elections be held so that a legitimate government could be formed and serve as an official negotiating partner to Germany. The negotiations produced the Treaty of Frankfurt on 10 May 1871: Germany annexed part of Alsace and Lorraine, and imposed a war indemnity of 5 billion gold francs as well as a victory parade by Prussian troops in Paris.

However, on 22 January, the Parisians, furious in the wake of the siege and feeling betrayed by the government, refused to accept defeat and demanded the election of a Commune. The city had not actually been captured by German troops, and its residents roundly condemned those they saw as capitulators. The 18 March insurrection triggered municipal elections and the proclamation of the Paris Commune. Similar uprisings also occurred in Lyon, Marseille and Toulouse.

Exasperation mounted on both sides: the federated forces’ anger at the ‘capitulators’ equalled the Versailles-based government’s fury with the rebels. A civil war to destroy the Commune broke out: from 3 April to 28 May 1871, the second siege of Paris was made possible by Bismarck’s attitude; without offering any military intervention, he nevertheless made the French army’s task easier. The conflict pitted two armies of tens of thousands of combatants against each other. The Commune collapsed after two months of fighting and the rebels were subjected to brutal repression by the government: the Bloody Week was followed by executions and harsh sentences.
The war marked the dawn of a new era in the political, diplomatic and military spheres. 1871 saw new regimes in place in France and Germany, while the withdrawal of French troops from Rome paved the way for the final phase of Italian unification.

France quickly got back on its feet, despite the losses of territory and payment of the war indemnity, and forged ahead with its new ambitions by developing its colonial empire. Aware of having been militarily outclassed, the country reformed its military policy, completely overhauled the army, in terms of both organisation and equipment, and cultivated the spirit of revenge in the hope of retrieving Alsace and Lorraine. The unification of Germany and dividends of victory served to boost its economy, already growing rapidly, and the country became a success story. As antimilitarist sentiment surfaced in certain circles in France, Germany saw the emergence of a mostly middle-class fascination for the military institution.

The subtle and complex manoeuvrings of European diplomacy had confined the 1870–1871 war to France and the German states. However, in 1875 a short-lived diplomatic crisis, dubbed ‘War in Sight’, revealed a new politico-strategic configuration, with both Great Britain and Russia ready to support France in a bid to contain Germany whose excessive power they saw as a threat. Bismarck then felt that Germany should adopt a pacifying policy in Europe.
MEMORIES OF THE WAR AND THE COMMUNE

The war and its political and diplomatic consequences left a lasting mark on European artistic output and cultural life. In France and Germany, remembrance of the war was very soon incorporated into architecture and town planning: war-related monuments, memorials and place names were widespread throughout the two countries. At the same time, groups of former combatants were springing up everywhere, working alongside local authorities and the Church to organise commemorations and ensure their success.

In France, in spite of defeat and invasion, remembrance of the war contributed to the republican reconstruction of national history. It was brought to life in spectacular forms, with painted panoramas, figurative art and monumental sculptures that emphasised the courage of the vanquished. Remembrance of the Commune, spurred on by censorship and paradoxically strengthened by the opposition it encountered, took shape in forms that were more modest but that helped it to be transmitted, such as books, songs, engravings and photographs. This form of remembrance carried on developing after the amnesty. The damage and destruction wrought by the war and the Commune was the topic of lively debate: should the ruins of the ‘annus horribilis’ be preserved or eradicated? Should damaged buildings be restored or new ones built in their place?

In Germany, post-victory elation was expressed through historically-themed paintings, statues, monuments dedicated to the Emperor, Bismarck and Moltke, and painted panoramas depicting battles. Historians and journalists also busied themselves retracing the history of the unification wars, soon presented as a founding ‘triptych’.
6 August 1806
Disappearance of the Holy Roman Empire under the pressure of Napoleon I

14 October 1806
Decisive victory by Napoleon I at Jena over the Prussian army

16–19 October 1813
Russians, Prussians, Austrians, Swedes and Saxons defeat Napoleon I at the battle of Leipzig

9 June 1815
End of the Congress of Vienna

1840
Diplomatic ‘Rhine crisis’ between France and the German Confederation

1848 revolutions
  • February Revolution (22–25 February) in France: fall of the July Monarchy, proclamation of the Second Republic
  • March Revolution (6 March–3 April 1849) in Germany: failed attempt to create a German constitutional monarchy

1864–1865
War waged by Austria allied with Prussia against Denmark, known as the Second War of the Duchies

Summer 1866
War between Prussia and Austria

4 July 1866
Prussian victory at Königgrätz

14 July 1870
Ems dispatch episode, Bismarck manoeuvres France into declaring war

19 July 1870
France declares war on Prussia, which is supported by the southern German states

6 August 1870
The Germans win the battles of Froeschwiller-Woerth and Forbach-Spicheren and invade Alsace

16–18 August 1870
Battles of Rezonville-Mars-la-Tour then Gravelotte-Saint-Privat, the Germans encircle the French army in Metz and open up the road to Paris

1 September 1870
Decisive German victory at Sedan

2 September 1870
Napoleon III surrenders and is taken prisoner

4 September 1870
In Paris, the Second Empire collapses, the temporary Government of National Defence is formed

20 September 1870
Start of the siege of Paris

27 September 1870
Strasbourg, besieged since 16 August, surrenders

28 October 1870
Capitulation of Bazaine in Metz

11–19 January 1871
Decisive German victories at Le Mans, Héricourt, Saint-Quentin and Buzenval

18 January 1871
Proclamation of the German Empire at Versailles

26 January 1871
Signature of the armistice between France and Prussia

15 February 1871
Prolongation of the armistice agreement of 26 January

28 February 1871
Signature of preliminary peace settlements between France and Germany

18 March 1871
In Paris, popular uprising against the army, start of the civil war

28 March 1871
Proclamation of the Paris Commune

10 May 1871
Signature of the Treaty of Frankfurt, end of the Franco-German war

21 May 1871
The French army enters Paris, start of the Bloody Week

28 May 1871
The French army recaptures all of Paris, end of the Paris Commune

13 September 1873
Evacuation of Verdun by the Germans, total liberation of French territory

April 1875
‘War in Sight’ diplomatic crisis between France and Germany

3 August 1914
Germany declares war on France

9 November 1918
In Berlin, simultaneous proclamation of the German Republic and the Free Socialist Republic of Germany

11 November 1918
Signature of the armistice between the Allies and Germany

4–13 January 1919
Spartacist uprising in Berlin

28 June 1919
Signature of the Treaty of Versailles between the Allies and Germany

30 June 1930
Total evacuation of German territory by the French
EXHIBITION

CURATORS
Mathilde Benoistel, assistant curator in the Musée de l’Armée’s experts and inventory department
Sylvie Le Ray-Burimi, head curator, in charge of the Musée de l’Armée’s painting and sculpture department, as well as of the drawings, engravings and photographs room, and the library
Christophe Pommier, assistant curator in the Musée de l’Armée’s artillery department

EXHIBITION
Marc Vallet, layout design
Yan Stive, graphic design
Etna lumière, lighting

PUBLICATION
The exhibition catalogue is available at the museum’s book-shop
Published by Editions Gallimard
Exhibition booklets and game-booklets (from 9 upwards) are available online

Prices, opening hours, information and bookings
musee-armee.fr

#franceallemagnes

AROUND THE EXHIBITION...

GUIDED TOURS
Families, school groups, and students
jeunes@musee-armee.fr
Adults : benedicte@cultival.fr

ENTERTAINING GUIDED TOURS
Children from 9 upwards, and parents
Price : €7 per child and €12 per adult
jeunes@musee-armee.fr

CONCERTS
A cycle of 11 concerts echoes to the exhibition. Brahms, Bizet, Saint-Saëns, or Wagner among others.
From 21 April to 16 June

LECTURES
1870-1871 : war, arts, history
The Musée de l’Armée is holding a cycle of lectures in partnership with the Permanent University of the City of Paris, which will successively tackle cultural, military and art history.
From 20 April to 9 May

SCREENINGS
1870-1871: Quiet please... Filming in progress!
The exhibition also features a film cycle: five fiction films and fictionalised documentaries explore how the Franco-German war and Paris Commune have been represented and transformed into a narrative, subjects that have inspired numerous directors both in France and elsewhere. The sessions will be run by film historian Patrick Brion.
From 15 to 19 May
Detailed programmes and bookings
musee-armee.fr