



**Michael E. Nolan.** *The Inverted Mirror: Mythologizing the Enemy in France and Germany, 1898-1914.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2005. IX + 141 S. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57181-669-6.



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**Published on** H-German (October, 2005)

## French and German Perceptions Before the Great War

*The Inverted Mirror* explores Franco-German relations prior to World War I. Michael Nolan examines public perceptions of the “enemy” in Germany and France from 1898 to 1914. Franco-German relations were characterized by a phenomenon that Nolan dubs the “inverted mirror.” The author notes that German historian Thomas Raithel, in his study *Das “Wunder” der inneren Einheit*, used the term “reverse mirroring.” Nolan pushes this metaphor further than Raithel, arguing that both France and Germany “projected certain assumptions about national character onto the other by way of creating its primary enemy.” Most important, according to Nolan, is that “the qualities each country ascribed to its chief adversary were exaggerated or negative versions of precisely those qualities that it felt to be lacking or inadequate in itself” (p. 2).

Nolan outlines his contentions very clearly in the introduction. He marks the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) as a turning point in how the French and the Germans perceived each other. Following that conflict, the French public no longer viewed Germany as a peaceful land of poets and thinkers but rather as a militaristic so-

ciety spearheaded by Prussian aggression and brutality. The Germans, for their part, equated their success with cultural superiority. Moreover, dominant ideologies of the late nineteenth century, such as nationalism, imperialism, and militarism, emerged in full force at the moment when France had lost its predominant position in Europe. Worst of all, according to Nolan, many French and German intellectuals related these ideologies to the social-Darwinist terminology of race and science. The “mythologizing” of the other nation as the hereditary enemy inside France and Germany was presented, both explicitly and implicitly, “at many different cultural levels” (p. 3).

Nolan traces his argument in five concisely and clearly written chapters. He provides a brief overview of Franco-German diplomatic relations between 1870 and 1914 in the first chapter. In chapter 2, Nolan demonstrates the use of the inverted mirror in assessments of the military qualities within France and Germany. Numerous plays, exhibits, novels, and historical scholarship in France attributed German victory in the Franco-Prussian War to a rigid, inflexible, and dehumanized mil-

itarist culture and saw this as part of a general German plan for “European domination that extended many years before 1870” (p. 30). The Germans, by contrast, viewed 1870 as the culmination of national unification and greatness, and proof that France no longer counted as a great power. Moreover, many Germans portrayed French military practices as dishonest. For example, some Germans described the French Foreign Legion as fraudulent, allowing France “to enjoy the fruits of its empire” by sparing its own soldiers (p. 38). Nolan also goes much deeper into his examination of the post-Darwin era effects on European developments. Increasingly modernized militaries and ardent nationalism made the “concept of a hereditary enemy possible, even necessary” in order to demonize the opposition in the struggle for national survival (p. 24).

Chapters 3 and 4 explore further examples of the inverted mirror. In chapter 3, the author states that many people in France and Germany assumed that “the cultural norms of a society reflected its material conditions” (p. 48). Thus, for instance, in his popular novel *The 500 Millions of the Begum* (1877), science fiction writer Jules Verne describes German industrialism as tyrannical, mechanical, and destructive. Verne depicts Professor Schultz, the major German character of the novel who creates the utopian Stahlstadt, as a robber baron “addicted to sausages, sauerkraut, and beer” (pp. 49-50). Many authors in both countries used images of consumption to characterize the opposite nation. French writers Leon Daudet, Paul d’Ivoi, and Colonel Royet, for instance, claimed that excessive alcohol consumption was the trademark of German culture, and related it to gluttony and intoxication (p. 63). Chapter 4 covers the conflicting French and German perceptions towards Alsace during German rule. Both countries considered Alsace,

annexed by the Germans following the Franco-Prussian War, to be an integral part of their nation. At the same time, Nolan demonstrates that French and Germans alike frequently questioned the Alsatians’ loyalty and held little regard for their wishes.

Chapter 5 is notable because Nolan attempts to answer the question of what one could call “the reception of perception”: how did broad segments of French and German society react to the public perceptions of the opposing nation? He points out that the political Right, although small in numbers, held a disproportionate influence on the popular press in both countries. In addition, the French and German socialist parties were deeply divided. French socialists mocked the German Social Democratic Party for the disjuncture between its revolutionary rhetoric and its comparatively moderate policies. The SPD, in turn, stated that French socialism was “fragmentary and lacking discipline” (pp. 90-95). The political Right’s promotion of national values and mythologizing of an enemy were, by comparison, easy to understand and became much more accepted in the middle-class parties of both countries.

Nolan’s research and methodology are solid. He employs a wide range of sources in both French and German, including literary works, travelogues, memoirs, popular images, as well as newspapers and journals from the mainstream press, political parties, and pressure groups. Nolan’s prose is lucid and concise, making his work easily accessible to both specialists and a more general audience. His study deserves attention from scholars studying international relations before the First World War because (instead of treating *Feindbilder* in isolation) it is a telling investigation of mutually antagonistic propaganda as a tool in forming national stereotypes.

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**Citation:** Jacob L. Hamric. Review of Nolan, Michael E., *The Inverted Mirror: Mythologizing the Enemy in France and Germany, 1898-1914*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11179>

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