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Rachel Chrastil, *The Siege of Strasbourg*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. ix, 302. ISBN 978–0–674–72886–8.

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*The Siege of Strasbourg* is a rich cultural history of the civilian experience of “total war” during the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71). Strasbourg was literally and figuratively a city at the crossroads, located in Alsace at the intersection of several major east-west arteries linking, for example, Paris to Munich or Vienna. Set astride Rhine River trade routes, it was home to a mixed, polyglot population speaking French, German, and the local Alsatian language. Significant Protestant and Catholic communities resided there, as did a relatively large Jewish minority. It was also a fortress city that housed eight thousand soldiers besides seventy-seven thousand civilians. Originally designed by the famous French military engineer the Marquis de Vauban (1633–1707), its fortifications were obsolete by 1870, but as the first French military strongpoint that an invading German army would encounter, Strasbourg was bound to play a role in the Franco-Prussian conflict.

Historian Rachel Chrastil (Xavier Univ.) uses personal papers and official documents from the Strasbourg municipal and regional archives to reveal how civilians experienced and endured the Prussian siege. Two wonderful maps identify the city’s principal landmarks, its fortifications, and the Prussian siege lines. Chrastil’s elegant prose amplifies the voices of civilians like seventy-year-old Frédéric Piton—a bookbinder, artist, and librarian—as well as imperial officials like the city’s prefect and commanding general during the siege, Jean-Jacques-Alexis Uhrich. Leading townsmen like physician Emile Küss and history teacher Rodolphe Reuss, a republican who had grown cynical about the supposed glories of Napoleon III’s empire, also feature prominently in the author’s story.

Rather than positing a central argument, Chrastil presents a set of key themes, such as the targeting of civilians, the destruction of cultural sites, and the place of humanitarianism. She notes that the lack of legal or humanitarian protections for civilians caught in the midst of war stood in marked contrast to many nineteenth-century social ideals. In particular, European societies wished to demonstrate an orderliness in which violence was a “sign of dysfunction” and civilian life “rested on stability, order, and predictability” (8). On this view, civilians should not be victims of war. But the apparent decline in violence proved to be illusory, as states brutally wielded force through professional police services and large conscript armies. The mobilization of entire societies and the development of such new weapons as breech-loading rifles and advanced artillery made war ever more devastating. Chrastil writes that the move toward total war blurred the lines between combatants and noncombatants. Civilians might participate in war in a variety of ways, sometimes as fighters, sometimes as caregivers.

In chapter 1, “The Grey Areas,” Chrastil discusses the effect of French mobilization on Strasbourg, as troops flowed into the city and civilians sought roles of their own. Young and middle-aged men could join the National Guard, which defended the city gates, or irregular sharpshooter units (*francs-tireurs*), who occupied an ambiguous position between soldier and civilian: neither proper frontline soldiers nor truly civilians, they yet played active roles in the city’s defense. Other civilians established makeshift hospitals—Strasbourg was to be a rear-echelon base to which soldiers could return for treatment and recuperation after offensives against Prussia and its German allies. But the Germans struck first and French troops retreated through the city and, “As besieging armies drew closer, everyone became a target” (40).

Chapter 2, “Insiders and Outsiders,” captures the effect of General Uhrich’s declaration of a state of siege (7 August 1870). The move took citizens by surprise, since they had expected the war to be fought elsewhere. The frenzied populace emptied the city’s bakeries and groceries and felt more isolated as every gate was shut. In this environment, Chrastil observes, identities were shaped by spatial and gendered defi-

nitions—civilians “took on a gendered division between those deemed ‘useless’ and those capable of protecting their neighborhoods” (42). New spatial boundaries kept townspeople from moving in and out of the fortified city without permission; nor could they go to areas reserved for military use, such as the citadel or the tall spires of Strasbourg’s churches. Where once civilians had gone to admire the view, soldiers now stood as lookouts.

Chapters 3, “Every Twenty Seconds,” 4, “Victims in the Eye of the Beholder,” and 5, “Carrying On” explore the civilian experience of the siege itself. Between 15 and 24 August, Prussian troops invested the city and identified Strasbourg’s northwest fortifications as the weakest. They built trench lines and directed artillery fire at the city’s defenses. From 24 to 27 August, Prussian gunners intensively bombarded the center of Strasbourg in an effort to convince its inhabitants to demand surrender. When this tactic failed, the Prussians shifted to bombarding the city’s fortifications, which they finally breached in late September. “In total, over the course of forty-four days between August 15 and September 27, the Germans sent 193,722 projectiles into Strasbourg, an average of one every twenty seconds” (67). The ravaged city was soon covered in dust, rubble, and a smoky haze hanging over its streets and shattered buildings. The German guns had destroyed such cultural icons as the Protestant New Church and its library. During one night’s barrage, the Catholic cathedral also caught fire. Such destruction of cultural sites demoralized many members of Strasbourg’s intellectual classes, for whom, Chrastil observes, civilization itself was under siege.

Civilians sheltered in cellars at night, but often moved about during the day. Simple decisions now brought heavy emotional burdens. Chrastil vividly conveys the anxieties that beset Strasbourg’s civilians: “Every evening around eight o’clock, [Catherine] Weiss faced a terrible dilemma. A night in the cellar protected her children from a random shell but entailed the risk of burying them alive. Weiss always made the choice to descend to relative safety underground, keeping shoes on Emile and Marie’s feet in case of a quick evacuation. She took comfort in the fact that her children slept happily, ‘conscious of nothing’” (72).

Even had Prussian forces not wished to hit civilians, they could hardly have avoided doing so. At the height of the siege, Strasbourg contained fifteen hospitals set up by the local Red Cross. The Prussians were under no legal obligation to spare civilian targets. Chrastil notes that international accords like the 1874 Geneva Conventions protected sick and wounded soldiers and their caregivers, but did not expressly prohibit bombardment of civilians. Prussian commanders assumed that any actions leading to the city’s swift capitulation were both justified and humane because, in their eyes, the sooner the war ended, the better.

In total, 861 soldiers and three hundred civilians died during the siege. The ten thousand civilians left homeless did not, however, view themselves as “victims” of war. Instead, they reserved that label for others. Thus civilian men displaced their suffering onto women, who in turn often focused on their children. Victimhood posed a threat to civilians’ sense of their own dignity and ability to exert agency. Thus, “crowds gathered larger than ever in public squares. Women and men found community at the religious services and clubs that continued to meet” (132). The municipal authorities opened schools, the customs house, and a covered market to provide shelter for the homeless. To care for the hungry and destitute, citizens themselves provided meals in privately funded *restaurants populaires*.

In chapter 6, “A Fraternal Hand,” Chrastil describes what she calls the first humanitarian intervention by a third party in an armed conflict. On 11 September, a Swiss delegation arrived to escort women, children, and elderly citizens from the beleaguered city. Over the next few days, some two thousand civilians left Strasbourg for sanctuaries in Switzerland. This humanitarianism, born of an increased compassion for others and respect for individual autonomy, was tied to the concept of civilizational progress. With this in mind, the Swiss intervention focused on women and children even though civilian men, Chrastil indicates, were far more likely to be harmed. The Swiss aid workers were allowing the men to maintain their gender roles as protectors of women and children. Yet by defining who qualified as a “victim” in need of “protection,” such humanitarianism was riven with a “paradox of liberation and domination” (175).

Chapter 7, “Heroic Measures,” explores the ethical considerations behind the city leaders’ decision to surrender. Chapter 8, “Strasbourg,” is devoted to the subsequent period of Prussian occupation, which was less onerous than what other French cities had to endure. Civilian responses ranged “from forced submis-

sion to prudent compromise to sincere expressions of unity” (211). The Prussians, after all, hoped to make Strasbourg and Alsace part of a unified German Empire. Over the following decades, the city underwent a massive urban revival, on which the German government spent over 50 million francs. (Ironically, this money came from the war indemnity levied on France.) As if to make up for the destruction of the New Church library during the war, by 1881 the city’s new university library housed the largest collection of books in the world.

The issues at the heart of Chrastil’s narrative—the role of civilians in war, the destruction of cultural sites, and humanitarianism—are evident in the twentieth century and beyond. During the First and Second World Wars, civilians were subjected to unprecedented aerial bombardments and invaluable cultural treasures were deliberately destroyed. Such barbarities led to measures to ensure humanitarian assistance to alleviate the suffering of both soldiers and civilians in wartime, but international law did not extend significant protections to civilians until the Geneva Conventions Additional Protocols of 1977. Although the Franco-Prussian War did not foreshadow all the characteristics of twentieth- and twenty-first-century conflict, Rachel Chrastil’s insightful work reminds us that the legacy of the siege of Strasbourg has much to teach us about war in our own time.