



Reims on Fire: War and Reconciliation between France and Germany

by Thomas W. Gaehtgens.

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In *Reims on Fire*, art historian Thomas Gaehtgens¹ places a masterpiece of Gothic architecture at the center of the forces of war, culture, society, and politics. His expertise in French and German art is apparent on every page of the book. More specifically, Gaehtgens explores how German artillery attacks on the Reims Cathedral during the First World War led to a “profound intellectual and personal rift” (1) between France and Germany. He notes that, although during previous wars the intellectual communities of belligerent nations had often stood unified against senseless violence, in this case rabid nationalism prevailed. His book’s seven thematic chapters clarify the significance of the cathedral to the French and how its damage opened an intellectual chasm between Germany and France that lasted for over fifty years.

Chapter 1, “The Shelling of Reims,” describes the early phases of the war, including the Germans’ occupation of Reims, their retreat from the city, and their subsequent artillery attacks on both the city and its cathedral. Military historians may take issue with some of Gaehtgens’ analysis of finer military points, but his overarching thesis concerning the attacks on the cathedral comes through loud and clear. The author is evenhanded throughout the book. Thus, for instance, he denies, based on the pertinent evidence, that there was any explicit German plan to destroy the cathedral as part of a campaign of cultural vandalism.

In the volume’s second and longest chapter, “The Cathedral in the Crossfire of the Media,” Gaehtgens examines how the Germans and the French and their respective allies subsequently portrayed the attack on the Reims Cathedral in the media. He brings their propaganda to life with many black-and-white and color plates. He also introduces the intellectual split which is the core concern of his book. Adducing the correspondence between academics on both sides who once considered themselves friends and colleagues, he highlights the divide between French *civilisation* and German *Kultur*. A second major topic of the chapter is the debate over the value of human life versus that of cultural monuments. The Germans tended to spare civilians rather monuments, while the French, in the words of writer and art historian Romain Rolland, “Kill people but respect their works! They are humanity’s cultural patrimony” (60).

Chapters 3–4, “The Myth of the Gothic in France” and “Gothic Style as German Art,” plot the intellectual debate over the Gothic style. Tracing various French and German scholars’ prewar research on attitudes toward the Gothic style, the author explains how a sense of “ownership” of the style fanned the flames of nationalist antagonism from the very outset of the war:

To understand the quarrel between the Germans and the French over the Reims shelling, one has to bear in mind the significance of the Gothic style, and Gothic cathedrals in particular, in French

1. A former director of the Getty Research Institute (2007–18), Gaehtgens is the author of, among many other works, *Versailles: de la résidence royale au Musée historique: la Galerie des batailles dans le Musée historique de Louis-Philippe* (Paris: A. Michel, 1981).

political and cultural life since the Middle Ages. Here I will mention only a few aspects of this broad theme, but it will be enough to explain why the German high command should never have allowed the officer commanding the troops stationed before Reims to fire on the Cathedral. (109)

That is, Gaehtgens clearly faults the German commanders' decision, despite having provided evidence (chap. 1) that the cathedral was a legitimate military target.

Chapter 5, "The Origin of the Kunstschutz," describes how the Germans established an art protection (Kunstschutz) unit led by Paul Clemen in response to negative propaganda over the Reims Cathedral attacks. Unfortunately, Gaehtgens explains neither what exactly the unit did during or after the war, nor whether the Germans were able to overcome the accusations of barbarism directed against them. He does, however, stress that, despite its best efforts, the Kunstschutz unit could not escape its political context or contamination by nationalist motives.

Chapter 6, "Restoring the Cathedral," concerns the heated contemporary debate over whether to (a) leave the ruins created by the Great War as they were, (b) structurally reinforce them and maintain them as ruins, or (c) fully restore them. The author discusses each option within his account of the restoration of the Reims Cathedral from 1918 to its eventual reopening in 1938. These debates over restoration still resonate today.

The final chapter, "The *Lieu de Mémoire* of Franco-German Friendship," vaults forward to 1962 and the Franco-German reconciliation carried out by President Charles de Gaulle and Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, concentrating on the meeting of the two leaders in Reims and the Treaty of Élysée, with attention to the many symbolic events that took place during Adenauer's visit. But Gaehtgens neglects the subject of Franco-German intellectual relations, which he promised to discuss earlier in his book. Moreover, he presents the debates over the cathedral from a strictly French perspective, with no attention to the period 1938–62. Nor does he provide any detailed context for the landmark 1962 reconciliation between de Gaulle and Adenauer. Perplexing, too, is the chapter's preoccupation with the political reconciliation of France and Germany, as opposed to the consequences of the sudden rupture of academic discourse between the two countries caused by the shelling of Reims Cathedral.

The intellectual debates described in *Reims on Fire* will recur in our own world as cultural monuments are damaged or destroyed in the crossfire of belligerents, even though international conventions and treaties have done much to codify how they should be treated. And, too, questions of the value of human life versus cultural heritage, as well as the role restoration plays in memory construction, remain relevant in the context of present-day conflicts. Being reminded of these questions is one of the most valuable attributes of this book.

Scholars interested in politics, diplomacy, war, and material culture will learn much from Thomas Gaehtgens's salutary consideration of the history of the Notre Dame de Reims Cathedral. He has effectively shown (both military and art) historians a new way to think about the role of buildings and monuments in the history of modern wars.