



This is a repository copy of *Binding the nation, bounding the state: Germany and its borders*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/141352/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Tompkins, A.S. [orcid.org/0000-0002-6044-2316](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6044-2316) (2019) *Binding the nation, bounding the state: Germany and its borders*. German History. ISSN 0266-3554

<https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghy116>

---

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced version of an article accepted for publication in German History following peer review. The version of record Tompkins, A.S., *Binding the Nation, Bounding the State: Germany and its Borders*, German History, 2019, is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghy116>

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

## Binding the Nation, Bounding the State: Germany and its Borders

(Review Article)

- C. Bernhardt, *Im Spiegel des Wassers: Eine transnationale Umweltgeschichte des Oberrheins (1800–2000)* (Köln, 2016)
- C.T. Dunlop, *Cartophilia: Maps and the Search for Identity in the French-German Borderland* (Chicago, 2015)
- M. Gehler and A. Pudlat (eds.), *Grenzen in Europa* (Hildesheim, 2009)
- B. Halicka, *Polens Wilder Westen: Erzwungene Migration und die kulturelle Aneignung des Odenraums 1945–1948* (Paderborn, 2013)
- J.B. Johnson, *Divided Village: The Cold War in the German Borderlands* (New York, 2017)
- U. Jureit, *Das Ordnen von Räumen: Territorium und Lebensraum im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Hamburg, 2012)
- Y. Komska, *The Iron Curtain: The Cold War's Quiet Border* (Chicago, 2015)
- K.L. Kopp, *Germany's Wild East: Constructing Poland as Colonial Space* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2012)
- J.J. Kulczycki, *Belonging to the Nation: Inclusion and Exclusion in the Polish-German Borderlands, 1939–1951* (Cambridge, MA, 2016)
- A. Lechevalier and J. Wielgoths (eds.), *Borders and Border Regions in Europe: Changes, Challenges and Chances* (Bielefeld, 2013)
- S. Marung, *Die wandernde Grenze: Die EU, Polen und der Wandel politischer Räume, 1990–2010* (Göttingen, 2013)
- P. Monforte, *Europeanizing Contention: The Protest against "Fortress Europe" in France and Germany* (New York, 2014)
- P. Polak-Springer, *Recovered Territory: A German-Polish Conflict over Land and Culture, 1919–89* (New York, 2015)
- S. Schaefer, *States of Division: Border and Boundary Formation in Cold War Rural Germany* (Oxford, 2014)
- K. Schlögel, *Grenzland Europa: Unterwegs auf einem neuen Kontinent* (München, 2013)
- E. Sheffer, *Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans made the Iron Curtain* (Oxford, 2011)
- A. Siebold, *ZwischenGrenzen: Die Geschichte des Schengen-Raums aus deutschen, französischen und polnischen Perspektiven* (Paderborn, 2013)

Borders are back, and with a vengeance. Not that they were ever really gone. As a number of studies over the last few years have demonstrated, the ‘de-bordering’ many thought they observed within Europe after 1989 was always accompanied by a forceful ‘re-bordering’ along the perimeter of the European Union, even if it long remained invisible to EU citizens. Yet with sufficient inattention to the militarization of Europe’s Mediterranean border, it was possible from the Schengen implementation in 1995 until the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015 to think that Germany had exchanged the Berlin Wall for open borders, much as postwar Europe had abandoned earlier debates about ‘bleeding borders’ and aspirations to ‘natural’ ones. But upon closer inspection, there was always plenty of continuity in every rupture, plenty of transfer from one space to the next. A 2014 protest by the performance artists of the Centre for Political Beauty drew attention to the discomfort created by bringing together different border paradigms.

A week before the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the group removed the white crosses outside the Bundestag memorializing those shot trying to escape East Germany during the Cold War. In the days that followed, similar crosses were photographed in the company of North African and Middle Eastern refugees along the Moroccan-Spanish border near Melilla and the Bulgarian and Greek borders with Turkey. The comparison between the ‘Iron Curtain’ and ‘Fortress Europe’ was, for many Germans, too close for comfort. An online poll on the protest action revealed that 60% disapproved of the action, either because they saw it as monument desecration or because they felt ‘escape from the GDR and refugee flows today are two entirely different topics’.<sup>1</sup>

Borders have become objects of intense public debate over the past few years, as unequal mobility across them has become increasingly associated with economic inequality between societies, and even within them. Though the debate has so far been much more acrimonious elsewhere (the United States, Britain, Poland, Austria), Germany’s economic and geographic position within Europe make it a particularly sensitive case. So too does its history. The borders of Germany (and therefore also of its immediate neighbours) have been among the least stable in Europe over the past two centuries, with most major changes to German territory linked to fundamental political restructuring—usually in the wake of wartime defeat.<sup>2</sup> A number of historians have examined the borders of Germany and of Europe over the last few years, using an increasingly diverse range of sources and approaches to provide new insights into sometimes classic questions about what borders mean and how people live with them.

This recent scholarship has drawn in part on the sophisticated theoretical literature that has developed in interdisciplinary border studies. While borders are commonly thought of in terms of lines on a map, they can equally be conceived as zones (‘borderlands’), which might be open and indeterminate (‘frontiers’); interactions within these spaces of liminality and overlap can lead to ‘hybridity’ or, on the contrary, to the reification and assertion of difference.<sup>3</sup> The ongoing ‘spatial turn’ has led to understandings of borders that mirror more complex understandings of ‘space’ generally: they are not the fixed products of a completed process, but are continually

---

<sup>1</sup> Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg (2014), *Gedenkkreuze für Mauertote entwendet: Wie finden Sie die Aktion?* <https://www.rbb24.de/politik/beitrag/2014/11/kreuze-mauertote-denkmal-diebstahl.html> (Accessed 11 Jul. 2015).

<sup>2</sup> G. Eley, ‘How and Where is German History Centered?’, in N. Gregor, N.H. Roemer and M. Roseman (eds.), *German History from the Margins* (Bloomington, 2006), pp. 268–286, here p. 268; V. Conze, ‘Die Grenzen der Niederlage. Kriegsniederlagen und territoriale Verluste im Grenz-Diskurs in Deutschland (1918–1970)’, in H. Carl, H.-H. Kortüm, D. Langewiesche and F. Lenger (eds.), *Kriegsniederlagen: Erfahrungen und Erinnerungen* (Berlin, 2004), pp. 163–184, here p. 165; A. Demandt, R. Hansen, I. Mieck, J. Riedmann, H.-D. Schultz, H. Wagner and K. Zernack (eds.), *Deutschlands Grenzen in der Geschichte* (München, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> A.C. Diener and J. Hagen, ‘Introduction. Borders, Identity, and Geopolitics’, in A.C. Diener and J. Hagen (eds.), *Borderlines and Borderlands: Political Oddities at the Edge of the Nation-State* (Lanham, MD, 2010), pp. 1–14, here pp. 9–10.

reproduced through practices and performances.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, bordering (and de-bordering) might be seen as ‘processes that cannot be finalized’.<sup>5</sup> For historians then, borders are socially constructed and unstable, subject to interpretation and redefinition.

Longstanding questions about the identities, discourses, and practices connected with borders continue to be asked, but their answers are increasingly inflected by notions of indeterminacy and social construction. The concept of ‘national indifference’, for example, draws attention to the shortcomings and failures of nationalist projects, focusing on those people who rejected exclusive belonging, switched affinities between nation-states, or embraced regional and local identities instead.<sup>6</sup> Postcolonial scholarship too has had an impact on research into borders in (and of) Europe, as historians have drawn on concepts such as ‘hybridity’ and ‘mimicry’ or used colonial analogies to explain other social hierarchies within borderlands. While borders were long studied through the lens of diplomatic sources, recent scholarship has moved to maps, engineering plans, photos, and memoirs that provide insight into the physical characteristics as well as the emotional meanings of borders. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is increasing attention to how local realities within borderlands differ from the plans emanating from imperial or national centres.

These theoretical and methodological trends have made themselves felt broadly, but the conclusions historians draw tend to depend largely on the historiographies of which particular border region they are examining. Along the French-German border, scholars have long been fascinated with how nineteenth-century nationalist conflict eventually gave way to European cooperation. Recent books (reviewed in the first section below) illustrate how unexpected and sometimes unintended entanglements contributed to the transnational development of the Upper Rhine Valley between France and Germany. Along Germany’s eastern borders (addressed in the second section), the prevalence of national conflict and forced migration has given rise to a sophisticated historiography of identity that examines how states claimed or rejected populations there. The books reviewed in this section focus largely on the incompleteness and frustrations of nationalizing processes in ‘Central Europe’ and the ways in which local populations responded to them. With regard to the Cold War border between East and West Germany (discussed in the third section), recent studies have transnationalized questions from GDR historiography about

---

<sup>4</sup> M. Löw, *Raumsoziologie* (Frankfurt am Main, 2001), pp. 13–15.

<sup>5</sup> J.W. Scott, ‘European Politics of Borders, Border Symbolism and Cross-Border Cooperation’, in T.M. Wilson and H. Donnan (eds.), *A Companion to Border Studies* (Chichester, 2012), pp. 83–99, here p. 84.

<sup>6</sup> T. Zahra, ‘Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis’, *Slavic Review*, 69, 1 (2010), pp. 93–119. The literature on national indifference is by now voluminous. Other key studies include J. King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948* (Princeton, NJ, 2002); P.M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); J.E. Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2008).

state-society relations and everyday life. These authors argue that the ‘Iron Curtain’ was shaped not only by systemic competition between states but by power relations between each state and the local populations within and just beyond its borders. Finally, in the literature on Europe’s external borders since 1989 (section four), historians and social scientists have explored how anxieties about migration, often inherited from earlier periods, have driven the construction of post-Cold War Germany and Europe. Taken together, these texts illustrate multiple methods for tackling overlapping questions and suggest the potential for further comparative work to disrupt and reconstruct narratives about Europe and Germany’s place in it.

### I. Borrowing from ‘the enemy’ in the West

The Franco-German border has shifted repeatedly over time, most infamously as the twin provinces of Alsace and Lorraine changed hands from France to Germany and back in 1870, 1918, 1940, and 1945. Alsace, especially its northern half with the city of Strasbourg, is therefore often used as shorthand for the border along the Rhine and occasionally as a metonym for broader European relations. (Lorraine tends to be studied mostly in connection with Alsace, while Saarland—often coveted by France but unrepentantly German through plebiscite after plebiscite—generally receives short shrift by comparison.<sup>7</sup>) Alsace has been studied as a transnational zone of conflict, contact, and cooperation: a ‘laboratory’ of nation-building in the past and now of Europeanization.

In close connection with this, a major interest of (foreign) scholars has related to questions of regional identity.<sup>8</sup> Catherine Dunlop’s *Cartophilia* examines identity through the lens of cartographic sources, starting with those produced by monarchies, militaries, and empires in order to provide a ‘commanding view’ that would bring ‘order and homogeneity to the visual

---

<sup>7</sup> On differences between Alsace and Lorraine (the latter often referred to by the name of the French *département* of Moselle), see A. Baumann, ‘Die Erfindung des Grenzlandes Elsass-Lothringen’, in B. Olschowsky (ed.), *Geteilte Regionen — geteilte Geschichtskulturen?: Muster der Identitätsbildung im europäischen Vergleich* (München, 2013), pp. 163–183; A. Carrol and L. Zanoun, ‘The View from the Border. A Comparative Study of Autonomism in Alsace and the Moselle, 1918–29’, *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire*, 18, 4 (2011), pp. 465–486. On the Saarland, see B. Long, *No Easy Occupation: French Control of the German Saar, 1944-1957* (Rochester, NY, 2015) and the earlier work of Rainer Hudemann, including R. Hudemann, A. Heinen and S. Dengel, *Das Saarland zwischen Frankreich, Deutschland und Europa 1945-1957: Ein Quellen- und Arbeitsbuch* (Saarbrücken, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> A. Carrol, ‘Les historiens anglophones et l’Alsace. Une fascination durable’, *Revue d’Alsace*, 138 (2012), pp. 265–283. For comprehensive studies of Alsatian identities, see also C.J. Fischer, *Alsace to the Alsatians?: Visions and Divisions of Alsatian Regionalism, 1870-1939* (New York, 2010) and G. Riederer, *Feiern im Reichsland: Politische Symbolik, öffentliche Festkultur und die Erfindung kollektiver Zugehörigkeiten in Elsaß-Lothringen (1871–1918)* (Trier, 2004). French-language historiography tends to shoehorn studies of Alsace into regional history. See L. Boswell, ‘Rethinking the Nation at the Periphery’, *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 27, 2 (2009), pp. 111–126, here p. 118.

image of the state'.<sup>9</sup> French technical expertise in cartography was developed first under the *Ancien Régime*, and later shared with the German states under French occupation as Napoleon enlisted them to map parts of his empire. Compatible cartographic knowledge allowed for extensive re-use by each new ruler. The first German map of Alsace was based explicitly on the *Carte de France*, with subsequent, new land surveys relying on prior triangulation points. When France retook Alsace in 1918, it waited several years before sending in surveyors, contenting itself in the interim with a 'new' map that mostly just renamed towns.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the projection of power onto—and *via* maps—frequently involved recycling available information and even borrowing it from competitors.<sup>11</sup>

Dunlop identifies similar evidence of layering and recycling in cadastral maps of Alsatian towns under German and then French rule. These not only copied basic data but recreated the accompanying decorative illustration of a farmer with a surveyor's tripod. Save for the German farmer's meatier physique or the French Republican coat of arms on a nearby shield (unadorned on the German version so towns could add their own insignia), the illustrations were practically identical.<sup>12</sup> Non-state actors who engaged in what Dunlop describes as 'popular cartography' likewise borrowed freely from their 'foreign' counterparts. The *Vogesenclub*, founded as a pro-German landscape tourism group, became the *Club Vosgien* after 1918, directly copying the German club's statutes and even 'obtaining the full collection of the German club's lithographic printing stones from Stuttgart'.<sup>13</sup>

Maps have also been tools of nationalists and nationalism, particularly when it came to outlining the (disjunctive) boundaries of language, culture, and the state. Like the other early maps Dunlop discusses, the first maps of language groups in France were commissioned by Napoleon for the purpose of imperial rule, to establish the centres and peripheries of 'France's five "mother languages": French, German, Flemish, Breton, and Basque'.<sup>14</sup> From the 1840s on, German mapmakers began to create linguistic maps for a different purpose: depicting a possible 'German' nation that was still 'in the making'.<sup>15</sup> An 1844 map by Karl Bernhardt not only left the line separating Francophone from Germanophone regions as a deliberate blur, it omitted

---

<sup>9</sup> C.T. Dunlop, *Cartophilia: Maps and the Search for Identity in the French-German Borderland* (Chicago, 2015), p. 26. For a related approach in a different context, see S. Seegel, *Mapping Europe's Borderlands: Russian Cartography in the Age of Empire* (Chicago, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Dunlop, *Cartophilia*, p. 39.

<sup>11</sup> This was also true for colonial Africa, where European rulers, for lack of resources, recycled the 'imprecise and fragmentary' maps of their predecessors. Even more than in Europe itself, such maps were a visual projection of colonial power that was not always able to make its presence felt on the ground. U. Jureit, *Das Ordnen von Räumen: Territorium und Lebensraum im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Hamburg, 2012), pp. 119–120.

<sup>12</sup> Dunlop, *Cartophilia*, pp. 98–99.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

altogether the borders of the supposedly corresponding states. That state and linguistic-cultural boundaries so poorly aligned was a source of constant irritation to nationalists after 1870. Heinrich Kiepert's map of *Sprachgebiete* marked 'the official border with a cross-marked line', but 'the language border with a thick red line', demonstrating how the language boundary of the *Kulturnation* was more salient and significant than that of the state. Meanwhile, Alsatian cartographers such as Pastor Louis-Gustave Liebich produced their own maps of local dialect use, encouraging the idea that Alsace was a region apart (whether it was within France or Germany).<sup>16</sup>

Equally irritating for nationalists on all sides was the failure of 'natural' borders to hold state or nation together in any meaningful sense. French *philosophes* and German Romantics both made arguments for the intrinsic superiority of nature and the limits it supposedly set.<sup>17</sup> French claims of the Rhine as France's 'natural' border antedate the Revolution (with ancient Gaul as a supposed precedent).<sup>18</sup> After Napoleon's armies marched well beyond it, Germans such as Ernst Moritz Arndt advanced counter-claims to the entire Rhine as 'Germany's River, Not Germany's Border'.<sup>19</sup> Yet as borders go, the Rhine was particularly difficult to mark and map. As Dunlop notes, 'Mapping the boundary line soon turned into a nascent canalization project; the only way to create the border was to stabilize the Rhine's constantly shifting river topography.'<sup>20</sup>

This and other engineering projects are the subject of Christoph Bernhardt's 'social and institutional history' of the Rhine.<sup>21</sup> Well into the nineteenth century, changes in the river's course moved towns from one side to the other or flooded them off the map entirely. National and natural shifts complicated one another in ways that could be difficult to disentangle. After Napoleon's defeat and the repudiation of his 1801 Treaty of Lunéville, it took six years for an international commission to 'restore' the former European order on the ground: many border markers had been washed away or destroyed by aggrieved locals; worse still, entire islands in the middle of the Rhine had disappeared, only to be replaced by new ones elsewhere—some as a result of towns and individuals damming river sections to expand their landholdings.<sup>22</sup> These

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 82–85.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 49–52.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 50 and P. Sahlin, 'Natural Frontiers Revisited: France's Boundaries since the Seventeenth Century. The American Historical Review', *American Historical Review*, 95, 5 (1990), pp. 1423–1451.

<sup>19</sup> See D. Suckow, 'Der Rhein als politischer Mythos in Deutschland und Frankreich', in K. Schlögel and B. Halicka (eds.), *Oder-Odra: Blicke auf einen europäischen Strom* (Frankfurt am Main, 2007), pp. 47–60, here pp. 48–51; B. Halicka, 'Rhein und Weichsel. Erfundene Flüsse oder Die Verkörperung des "Nationalgeistes"', in H.H. Hahn and R. Traba (eds.), *Parallelen* (Paderborn, 2012), pp. 71–93, here pp. 73–74. For the later history of such claims, see also P. Schöttler, 'The Rhine as an Object of Historical Controversy in the Inter-War Years. Towards a History of Frontier Mentalities', *History Workshop Journal*, 39 (1995), pp. 1–21.

<sup>20</sup> Dunlop, *Cartophilia*, p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> C. Bernhardt, *Im Spiegel des Wassers: Eine transnationale Umweltgeschichte des Oberrheins (1800–2000)* (Köln, 2016), p. 20. See also M. Cioc, *The Rhine: An Eco-Biography, 1815–2000* (Seattle, 2002) and D. Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* (London, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Bernhardt, *Im Spiegel des Wassers*, pp. 116–117.

problems hint at the motivations for the earliest engineering works on the Rhine: first and foremost, flood control and, secondarily, land reclamation. With the dawn of industrialization, these would give way to navigation, commercial use, and hydroelectric power generation. The river would thus be engineered and re-engineered repeatedly over time to suit competing purposes.

In Bernhardt's telling, engineering ambitions for the Rhine were transnational from the start: the plans articulated by Johann Gottfried Tulla (mythologized in the existing historiography and partly deconstructed here) were developed on the basis of ideas shared with French engineers, and they necessitated cooperation between France and Baden (as well as Bavaria and Prussia).<sup>23</sup> Nationalism and national competition were rarely significant obstacles to this shared technical vision. Conflicts were more likely to involve upstream and downstream cities, tensions between environmental management and industrial use, or mutually exclusive technical solutions. Where other authors have argued, for example, that sewage waste disposal in post-1870 Straßburg was opposed by French Alsatians as a form of 'German' modernization, Bernhardt argues that it was 'primarily... social-technical arguments' that actually drove the debate—and that these were part of transnational, European city planning discourses.<sup>24</sup> He also highlights how German authorities in 1917 considered canal plans that were remarkably similar to France's Grand Canal d'Alsace, which Germany later vigorously opposed.<sup>25</sup> Nationalist competition did significantly affect Rhine hydro-engineering after the First World War, but plans were bilaterally negotiated after the Second World War and cooperatively implemented from the late 1960s on, feeding into narratives of increasing Europeanization.<sup>26</sup>

Bernhardt and Dunlop are both consciously transnational in approach, bringing together sources from different sides of this contested borderland and examining them in relation to the circulation of technical knowledge. As a study of national identity, *Cartophilia* provides a narrative that is mostly in keeping with a well-established regionalist paradigm rather than, say, the concept of national indifference. Dunlop's great innovation is to tell this story almost exclusively through the creative and well-informed interpretation of map sources, no aspect of which seems to have escaped her attention. Bernhardt's study likewise demonstrates astoundingly comprehensive knowledge of hydrological engineering and planning processes that reshaped the Rhine. At times, one gets the impression that he therefore privileges technical explanations over social and political discourses that may well have been constitutive elements of conflict. However, his book amply demonstrates that cooperation can and often does prevail, even in disputed territories that

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 343–355.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 370–371.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 438.



are subject to extensive outside intervention. Furthermore, it shows that while borders are indeed places onto which nation-states project power, they are also places full stop, subject to interests that might be locally specific or regionally overarching and to problems that are technical or environmental as much as social and political in nature. As with the French and German cartographers Dunlop studies, Bernhardt's engineers were able to recycle or borrow freely from one another in part because their goals were compatible, they drew on shared expertise, and their plans were anchored in overlapping spaces.

## II. Expansion and expulsion in the East

At first glance, the history of Germany's eastern border appears less suited to narratives of mutual borrowing and shared development. The Polish-German border in particular carries far heavier historical baggage than the French-German border. Yet as several recent books argue, even seemingly non-transferable phenomena such as nationalism were in circulation across Germany's eastern borders. Both Germans and Poles have imagined their shared border zone as an American-style 'frontier' to be conquered: what was 'Germany's Wild East' in the nineteenth century became 'Poland's Wild West' after the Second World War.<sup>27</sup> The autochthonous population that had long lived in contested regions like Upper Silesia found itself caught in between these nationalist conflicts, and responded with rejection, ambivalence, and indifference.<sup>28</sup> As Poland's borders shifted and Germany's borders shrank after the Second World War, forced migration came to define the experiences of both Poles and Germans. The former struggled to appropriate (*aneignen*) the space and material culture<sup>29</sup> of the once-German lands and homes in which they now resided, while the latter had to adjust to a new life in a very different Germany, usually separated from their previous *Heimat* by the so-called 'Iron Curtain'. For these expellees as well as Sudeten Germans fleeing Czechoslovakia, defeat in the Second World War thus became immediately and inextricably linked to the constraints of a much longer Cold War.

Uncertainties about Germany's eastern border are rooted in the region's historically heterogeneous composition. 'German' presence in Poland dates back to Teutonic Knights in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, whose pre-national domains ultimately fed into Hohenzollern Prussia.<sup>30</sup> At the

---

<sup>27</sup> K.L. Kopp, *Germany's Wild East: Constructing Poland as Colonial Space* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2012); B. Halicka, *Polens Wilder Westen: Erzwungene Migration und die kulturelle Aneignung des Oderraums 1945–1948* (Paderborn, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> P. Polak-Springer, *Recovered Territory: A German-Polish Conflict over Land and Culture, 1919–89* (New York, 2015); J.J. Kulczycki, *Belonging to the Nation: Inclusion and Exclusion in the Polish-German Borderlands, 1939–1951* (Cambridge, MA, 2016).

<sup>29</sup> I have translated the term *kulturelle Aneignung* here and elsewhere as the 'appropriation of space and material culture' for clarity. As used here, the concept does not have the negative connotations associated with the more direct English translation, 'cultural appropriation', which is frequently used to refer to the unreflective or insulting misappropriation of subaltern culture by privileged groups.

<sup>30</sup> See N. Davies, *Vanished Kingdoms: The History of Half-Forgotten Europe* (London, 2011), pp. 325–393.

intersection of different languages but also different multi-ethnic empires, Germans, Poles, Jews, and others coexisted (however uneasily at times) under various sovereignties until the age of nationalism in the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> Germans, anxious to consolidate their own nation but also to catch up with other European imperial powers, imagined themselves as colonial masters in Eastern Europe, drawing on American and African analogies in the process. Kristin Kopp shows how novels such as Gustav Freytag's 1855 bestseller *Soll und Haben* or later novels set in Prussia's Eastern Marches cast Germans in a civilizing role vis-à-vis Eastern Europe. 'Poland' (to which Freytag's novel refers even though the state had then been partitioned out of existence) was thereby constructed as an American-style frontier for Germans to settle or as the home of an inferior, 'racially contagious' population characterized by the chaos of *polnische Wirtschaft*.<sup>32</sup>

This vacillation between 'megalomania and angst' only increased with the First World War.<sup>33</sup> As Kopp argues in a chapter devoted to cartography, maps were here too a key tool for making territorial claims. Pan-Germanist mapmakers such as Professor Dieter Schäfer filled Eastern Europe with lightly shaded spaces onto which they could project a 'German' population. Schäfer's 1916 map of Europe's *Länder und Völker* downplayed or ignored the presence of significant minorities among Germans (Jews, Kashubs, Sorbs) while highlighting the supposed 'German admixture' of populations in other areas. For Schäfer, the East was a chaotic place, with "peoples and population fragments... so jumbled up by the course of history that it would be impossible to separate them by any continuous borders".<sup>34</sup> A different but related practice prevailed in German maps of Africa, as Ulrike Jureit argues in her comparative study of colonial Southwest Africa, Ober Ost during the First World War, and Nazi *Lebensraum*. On colonial maps, the absence of European knowledge about peoples and populations produced abundant 'blank spaces' that came to represent 'colonial potential' that Germans were incited to fulfil.<sup>35</sup>

Both Kopp's analysis of colonialist culture and Jureit's comparison of spatial imaginings pose questions about imperialist continuities, but the two authors come to rather different conclusions. Kopp argues that Poland and Southwest Africa 'were ideologically linked, constituent parts of an overarching German imperial project', which ultimately created a 'point of

---

<sup>31</sup> On how German understandings of Eastern neighbours shifted over time, see V.G. Liulevicius, *The German Myth of the East* (Oxford, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> The term often is translated as 'economic mismanagement', but is employed in ways that evoke 'the condition of a primitive people unable to fully manage the stresses and responsibilities of civilized life'. Kopp, *Germany's Wild East*, 86-70; see also H. Orłowski, "*Polnische Wirtschaft*": *Zum deutschen Polendiskurs der Neuzeit* (Wiesbaden, 1996).

<sup>33</sup> G. Thum, 'Megalomania and Angst. The Nineteenth-Century Mythicization of Germany's Eastern Borderlands', in O. Bartov and E.D. Weitz (eds.), *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington, IN, 2013), pp. 42–60.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Kopp, *Germany's Wild East*, p. 131.

<sup>35</sup> Jureit, *Das Ordnen von Räumen*, p. 125.

consensus' in German society to which Hitler was then able to appeal.<sup>36</sup> Jureit, on the other hand, argues that there was not one 'continuous, consistent' spatial principle linking German imperialisms, in part because colonialism was about subordination and exploitation rather than 'racial-biological homogenization'.<sup>37</sup> Colonial analogies would nevertheless continue to condition Germans' self-image well past the turn of the century.

After Germany's 1918 defeat, that self-image radicalized in ways that fostered embittered irredentism.<sup>38</sup> In this context, Kopp shows how maps were used to inculcate schoolchildren with understandings of national belonging that were fundamentally anchored in space. In a prelude to later West German maps that would show areas east of the Oder-Neisse line 'under temporary Polish administration', the 1921 Convention of German Geographers called for all maps for school use to include the pre-1918 German border.<sup>39</sup> A further set of school maps emphasized the expansiveness of an 'essentialized *Kulturboden*', in which the supposedly 'civilizing' qualities of past German 'cultural work' (*Kulturarbeit*) were made into a permanent characteristic of the landscape.<sup>40</sup> Germanness was thus embedded in land itself, much as the Nazis claimed it to be embedded also in the body. Ideas about the supposed 'blood and soil' roots of identity were reinforced by biological metaphors for lost territories as 'amputated limbs' or a 'bleeding border'.<sup>41</sup>

Yet as Peter Polak-Springer points out, neither the biologization of territory nor violent irredentism was exclusively German: for example, Polish nationalists argued that the border set by the League of Nations following the 1921 plebiscite had "cut the living organism of the Polish peoples in Upper Silesia in two, thereby creating a situation which we insurgents have never recognized and will never recognize".<sup>42</sup> This is but one illustration of Polak-Springer's larger argument that a 'transnational culture of irredentism' developed in Upper Silesia, as German revanchists and Polish insurgents mimicked one another in nearly every domain. In this contested territory, German and Polish authorities sponsored rallies near the border (Polish ones were famous for their after-midnight gun salutes), used imposing architecture to lay claim to space (e.g. the 'Deutschland, Deutschland über alles' inscription atop the Nazis' forty-metre-high Borderland Tower in Ratibor<sup>43</sup>), and enlisted folklorists to assert the primordial Germanness or

---

<sup>36</sup> Kopp, *Germany's Wild East*, p. 23.

<sup>37</sup> Jureit, *Das Ordnen von Räumen*, 390, 394.

<sup>38</sup> For a fascinating examination of other German responses to border changes in and after World War I, see A.H. Sammartino, *The Impossible Border: Germany and the East, 1914–1922* (Ithaca, 2010).

<sup>39</sup> Kopp, *Germany's Wild East*, p. 135, drawing on G.H. Herb, *Under the Map of Germany: Nationalism and Propaganda 1918–1945* (London, 1997).

<sup>40</sup> Kopp, *Germany's Wild East*, p. 205.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 139–140.

<sup>42</sup> Polak-Springer, *Recovered*, p. 59.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 110, 112.

Polishness of the region and its people. As with maps in Alsace, monuments to one regime were simply relabelled or repurposed when territory changed hands: the Voivodeship Government Building in Katowice, built as a paean to Polishness by voivode Michał Grażyński, found its way onto postcards promoting Nazi-era Kattowitz—its unambiguously Polish insignia ‘R.P.’ (*Rzeczpospolita Polska*, ‘Republic of Poland’) reinterpreted to mean *Regierungs-Präsidium* (‘government headquarters’).<sup>44</sup> The net effect of German and Polish nationalists both claiming Upper Silesia for their side was the profound alienation of the very people living there. Residents resented outside elites of all stripes and even adapted their insults to successive rulers: administrators from interwar Poland were derided as carpetbagging *gorole* (‘mountaineers’ in local dialect), their Nazi usurpers as *Westgorole*; ‘P.G.’ was used as a tongue-in-cheek abbreviation for Nazi *Parteigenossen*—or for *pierniarskie gorole* (‘damned mountaineers’).<sup>45</sup> As these examples illustrate, irredentism irritated the population in contested areas like Upper Silesia, leading them to embrace national indifference in response.

Indifference proved a difficult position to maintain in the face of the Second World War though, and not only in Upper Silesia. Both under the Nazi occupiers and the Polish socialists that succeeded them, evidence of national belonging became critical to accessing welfare and exercising basic rights, as Jan Kulczycki stresses in his study of national identity policies in the Polish-German borderlands.<sup>46</sup> This was particularly extreme during the Second World War, when self-declared ‘Poles’ in Nazi-annexed regions were deported to the *Generalgouvernement* (or worse), while ‘Germans’ were accorded privileges and property. Under such obviously coercive conditions, even the Nazis did not take the population’s professions of Germanness at face value, setting up the *Deutsche Volksliste* (DVL) as a means of sorting them into categories: category I (14% of the 2.5 Million registered) and II (13%) received full citizenship, while the far more numerous ‘threes’ (65%) had only revocable citizenship, even as they were subject to conscription; ‘fours’ (6%) were considered potentially ‘disloyal’ (*abtrünnig*), but in regions like Wartheland many were promoted to category III later in the war to incentivize service to the Nazis.<sup>47</sup> As this implies, nationality policies were anything but consistent. DVL classification criteria, for example, varied over time and from one *Reichsgau* to the next, emphasizing language,

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 96-7, 156-7. This reappropriation of the symbols of Polish Upper Silesia was made all the easier by the fact that Grażyński’s properly irredentist decorations also included references to supposedly Polish towns in German Upper Silesia.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>46</sup> Kulczycki, *Belonging to the Nation*.

<sup>47</sup> For details, see G. Janusz, ‘Die rechtlichen Regelungen Polens zum Status der deutschen Bevölkerung in den Jahren 1938 bis 1950’, in M. Kittel (ed.), *Deutschsprachige Minderheiten 1945: Ein europäischer Vergleich* (München, 2007), pp. 131–189, here p. 136. On similar classification schemes in East-West comparison, see T. Zahra, ‘The ‘Minority Problem’ and National Classification in the French and Czechoslovak Borderlands’, *Contemporary European History*, 17, 2 (2008), pp. 137–165.

‘racial’ background, political leanings, or ‘behaviour’ (i.e. membership in German nationalist organizations prior to the war). Registration remained voluntary in the *Generalgouvernement*, but was spurred on by ultimatum in Wartheland and by the deliberate relaxation of criteria in Silesia.<sup>48</sup> Kulczycki argues that ‘neither victimization nor active collaboration with the Germans’ was the norm in the German-Polish borderlands: ‘Most simply adapted to the situation and sought to ensure their own survival and that of their families, even at the price of far-reaching moral and political compromises’.<sup>49</sup>

After the war ended, the DVL was turned on its head, with the post-war Polish state initially interpreting past registration as a sign of irreducible foreignness, unforgivable treachery, or shameful opportunism. Accordingly, *Volksdeutsche* were to be punished and, whenever possible, expelled or otherwise compelled to leave. Following mass expulsions though, emphasis shifted to ‘verification’ and ‘rehabilitation’ procedures that would allow Poland to retain a sufficiently Polish (and preferably skilled) portion of the ‘autochthonous’ population.<sup>50</sup> These procedures turned into a reckoning not only with the Second World War but with Poland’s many national minorities (Mazurs, Kashubs, Warmiaks, Silesians), all of whom had difficulty finding a place in the new, more ethnically homogeneous postwar state. Small wonder then that disproportionately high numbers of them opted to seek emigration to (West) Germany. As the lands east of the Oder were opened up to Polonizing resettlement, what remained of this rooted, autochthonous population ‘had to adapt to the culture of the newcomers, not vice versa’.<sup>51</sup>

Beata Halicka’s monograph on ‘Poland’s Wild West’ is a social history of those newcomers and their resettlement process, written consciously with a perspective ‘from below’. Hence her title refers not to the top-down official myth of ‘recovered lands’ (territory of the medieval Piast dynasty supposedly returned to Poland after centuries of German colonization), but to a popular, American-inspired ‘Wild West’ narrative of frontier conquest.<sup>52</sup> As in occupied Germany, life in the newly unsettled borderlands along the Oder River was especially chaotic in the immediate postwar period (here 1945–48). Poles and Germans briefly lived together (sometimes literally, as Poles were quartered in soon-to-be-former German homes) under competing authorities: separate Polish military and civil administrations coexisted in some areas with a new German civil administration set up by the Red Army, which itself retained the last

---

<sup>48</sup> Kulczycki, *Belonging to the Nation*, 37, 41.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>50</sup> See also H. Service, *Germans to Poles: Communism, Nationalism and Ethnic Cleansing after the Second World War* (Cambridge, 2013).

<sup>51</sup> Kulczycki, *Belonging to the Nation*, p. 302.

<sup>52</sup> Halicka, *Polens Wilder Westen*, p. 7.

word.<sup>53</sup> These created only a haphazard structure though for a resettlement process that involved millions. As the land emptied of Germans, Polish settlers who had been forced to leave their homes in the *kresy* (taken by the Soviet Union) arrived in ‘a foreign, deserted world’ full of artefacts left by previous owners whose standard of living had been much higher.<sup>54</sup> Halicka shows that people responded in very different ways to the challenge of appropriating the space and material culture of these supposedly ‘recovered lands’: some felt forever transient in the borderland, while others embraced a pioneering spirit; many felt deeply uncomfortable taking the homes of other forced migrants, while a very small number plundered German homes for personal gain (at the expense of a more equitable redistribution of property for the many).<sup>55</sup> The fates of both departing Germans and arriving Poles depended greatly on the precise timing, origin, and destination of their migration, as well as their own personal circumstances and attitudes.<sup>56</sup>

The German expellee experience is generally well-documented, with several major monographs having appeared in English in recent years.<sup>57</sup> Yuliya Komska’s *Icon Curtain* departs from these by focusing not on political narratives or memories of *Heimat*, but on how Sudeten German expellees engaged with the border landscape between Bavaria and Czechoslovakia. Unlike the Poland-GDR border (wholly inside the Soviet bloc), this was a space where Eastern and Western blocs met, and where the history of ‘postwar’ expulsion thus overlapped with ‘Cold War’ confrontation.<sup>58</sup> Religion was central to how expellees here exerted agency over their fate, building a ‘prayer wall’ of chapels and towers along the border as a bulwark against the communist, atheist regime that had expelled them. This became part of a pilgrimage infrastructure, complete with holy statues miraculously transported (or just discreetly smuggled) from demolished German churches on the Czechoslovak side.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 104–109, 158–162. See also J. Musekamp, *Zwischen Stettin und Szczecin: Metamorphosen einer Stadt von 1945 bis 2005* (Wiesbaden, 2010), pp. 32–43.

<sup>54</sup> Halicka, *Polens Wilder Westen*, p. 154. On the unmixing of populations in the *kresy*, see K. Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* (Cambridge, MA, 2004).

<sup>55</sup> Halicka, *Polens Wilder Westen*, 170–74, 194.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Ibid., 65–76, 125–130.

<sup>57</sup> P. Ahoenon, *After the Expulsion: West Germany and Eastern Europe 1945-1990* (Oxford, 2003); T.D. Curp, *A Clean Sweep?: The Politics of Ethnic Cleansing in Western Poland, 1945–1960* (Rochester, NY, 2006); A. Demshuk, *The Lost German East: Forced migration and the politics of memory, 1945–1970* (Cambridge, 2012); R.M. Douglas, *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War* (New Haven, 2012). In German, see, for example, P. Ther, *Deutsche und polnische Vertriebene: Gesellschaft und Vertriebenenpolitik in der SBZ-DDR und in Polen 1945–1956* (Göttingen, 1998); A.R. Hofmann, *Die Nachkriegszeit in Schlesien: Gesellschafts- und Bevölkerungspolitik in den polnischen Siedlungsgebieten 1945-1948* (Köln, 2000) and relevant entries in H.H. Hahn and R. Traba (eds.), *Deutsch-Polnische Erinnerungsorte* (Paderborn, 2012-2015), 4 vols.

<sup>58</sup> Y. Komska, *The Icon Curtain: The Cold War's Quiet Border* (Chicago, 2015), pp. 34–36.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

The region also attracted more conventional nature tourism to the divided 'Bavarian' or 'Bohemian Forest'.<sup>60</sup> Whereas the photo albums of ordinary German tourists were filled with images of 'recognizable vast or spectacular vistas', those of Sudeten Germans contained photos of 'nondescript fields or forest clearings', with family members pointing into the distance beyond where their former homes lay.<sup>61</sup> Sudeten Germans cultivated longings for their former *Heimat* not only through photographic representations but also by looking directly at it, even building lookout towers along the border. The views these towers framed of selected towns carried different connotations from similar towers along the inter-German border, whose meanings were overwhelmingly anti-communist.<sup>62</sup> Mixing this 'Cold War' message with one about 'postwar' expulsion, the Bavarian-Czech border had more limited general appeal and remained a 'quiet border' of the Cold War. Komska thus uses the specificity of this unusual landscape to argue that there was not simply one, but 'many Iron Curtains'.<sup>63</sup>

Both Komska and Kopp are based in cultural studies rather than history, and they are among the most creative in their use of sources. In reconstructing Sudeten German experiences, Komska draws on a range of literary and visual materials, from poetry and illustrations in expellee publications to prayer leaflets, photographs, and landscapes themselves. Kopp's study dissects colonialist attitudes embedded not only in literature and maps but also in film (Fritz Lang's 1924 *Nibelungen*). The interdisciplinary approaches of these two authors allow them to shift substantially the perspective on their topics, showing in Kopp's case how imperialist thinking was continually reproduced and, in Komska's, how expulsion was lived and worked through in the Czech-Bavarian borderland. The works by Kulczycki, Halicka, and Polak-Springer are more closely interrelated, dealing with different aspects of German-Polish conflict. Kulczycki's is a comprehensive synthesis of literature on nationality policies, but he nevertheless has a clear eye for detail, picking out telling examples from published primary sources and using them to differentiate by region.<sup>64</sup> Polak-Springer and Halicka have both mined the archives to produce their research. Polak-Springer's case study of Upper Silesia is distinguished by his consistently transnational approach and argument, which cleverly highlights the unexpected overlaps (and parallel shortcomings) of irredentists on both the German and Polish sides. Halicka's study of the middle and upper Oder is focused mostly on Polish experiences, which she convincingly reconstructs as 'history from below' based on a wealth of ego documents (chiefly memoirs

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>62</sup> A. Eckert, "'Greetings from the Zonal Border". Tourism to the Iron Curtain in West Germany', *Zeithistorische Forschungen / Studies in Contemporary History*, 8, 1 (2011), pp. 9–36.

<sup>63</sup> Komska, *Icon Curtain*, p. 10.

<sup>64</sup> The most important of these published collections is W. Borodziej and H. Lemberg (eds.), *Die Deutschen östlich von Oder und Neiße 1945-1950: Dokumente aus polnischen Archiven* (Marburg, 2000-2004), 4 vols.

produced for ‘writing contests’<sup>65</sup>). These three authors have combined German and Polish perspectives ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ in different ways, but all speak to the complexity of belonging within this hotly contested region.

### III. Everyday life at the German-German border

Komska’s argument for a pluralization of ‘*the Iron Curtain*’ has also been taken up by several authors working on its more famous, German-German instantiations. Popular interest in Germany’s Cold War borders has tended to be focused on the Berlin Wall, where urban space proved particularly difficult to disentangle.<sup>66</sup> Berlin was also important as a key crossing point between East and West, but the enclave’s unique situation makes a poor basis for generalization, particularly with regard to the rural spaces that made up the overwhelming bulk of the border. Recent scholarship has focused on a range of less urban constellations: Edith Sheffer has examined relations between the provincial towns of Sonneberg (Thuringia) and Neustadt bei Coburg (Bavaria); Sagi Schaefer has studied state-building in the farmlands of the Eichsfeld (extending into Hesse, Lower Saxony, and Thuringia);<sup>67</sup> and Jason Johnson has focused on the East German state’s interventions in tiny, isolated Mödlareuth (between Bavaria and Thuringia). Unlike along (united) Germany’s Western and Eastern borders, questions of national belonging and forced migration are less relevant here. Rather, these authors are all concerned primarily with what the construction and acceptance of borders can tell us about relations between state and society (the two always entangled). With locally varying degrees of success, the East and West German states both used division to project power into remote, rural spaces. Residents pushed back in ways that reshaped local realities, but they also participated in bordering processes where they perceived their advantage in it. On the ground, local acceptance of new borders had less to do with commitment to a political-economic ideology than with the everyday ‘geopolitics’ of rural life: relations with neighbours, practical concerns about security, economic competition, and access to property or resources. All three books follow similar chronologies based on the porosity of the border: initial postwar instability led to border controls that were dramatically

---

<sup>65</sup> Such competitions were sponsored by sociologists from the Instytut Zachodni in Poznań (drawing on a practice of the Chicago School). Halicka is cognizant of the complexity of these memory-based sources, shaped as they were by pressures to elicit a heroic narrative. She thus refers mostly to the original, archived versions rather than published texts, and analyses them in conjunction with literature, photos, and other sources.

<sup>66</sup> For a typical popular account, see F. Taylor, *The Berlin Wall: A World Divided, 1961–1989* (London, 2006). For a review of other recent works, see P. Steege, ‘Crisis, Normalcy, Fantasy. Berlin and its Borders’, *Contemporary European History*, 23, 3 (2014), pp. 469–484.

<sup>67</sup> The Eichsfeld was notably also the focus of the ethnographic work by D. Berdahl, *Where the World Ended: Re-unification and Identity in the German Borderland* (Berkeley, CA, 1999).



tightened in 1952, followed by a consolidation of the status quo (symbolized by the 1961 construction of the Berlin Wall) until the border's sudden demise in 1989–90.

When Churchill declared in March 1946 that an 'Iron Curtain' had descended across Europe, few serious barriers had yet been erected within occupied Germany. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Germans were officially forbidden from crossing between occupation zones, but the border between the Soviet and American or British zones was, for the most part, a 'green border' that was easily crossed. In Johnson's Mödlareuth, for example, the demarcation line was a creek shallow enough to be forded and narrow enough to be jumped across.<sup>68</sup> The chief obstacles to crossing were the Allied soldiers and German border police who patrolled the demarcation line, destabilizing life in the borderlands by their very presence. American troops drank, brawled and took joyrides along the border, and Red Army troops supplemented their own meagre provisions by extorting or stealing goods from residents. German border police on both sides were initially poorly paid and thus highly susceptible to bribery; in the American sector, they were also forbidden from using weapons within one kilometre of the border, making them a rather toothless form of dissuasion.<sup>69</sup> As a result, smuggling (of people and goods) was rampant. In some cases, 'smuggling' represented merely the criminalized continuation of trade disrupted by the new interzonal border. Over time though, it became increasingly associated with danger, as economic and security concerns became conflated following Currency Reform in the Western zones on 20 June 1948—not least because, as Schaefer shows, American and British authorities feared political destabilization through 'cheap competition and orchestrated sabotage' from the centrally planned economy next door.<sup>70</sup> The Currency Reform also worsened inequality between zones, feeding Western perceptions of Eastern poverty and turning former neighbours into othered objects of pity and disdain. On the ground, the division that the West German government so loudly decried was in fact self-reinforcing and propelled forward by its own citizens: an insecure border between unequal, incompatible economies led better-off West Germans especially to clamour for more protection. As Sheffer forcefully argues, 'the border's insufficiencies, ironically, enhanced its legitimacy.'<sup>71</sup>

Increased border enforcement and incursions by one side repeatedly led to escalations by the other. Border policing was regionally based in both countries at first, but quickly brought under central control in the Soviet zone and in its East German successor state. By 1951, the Western Allies acquiesced to West German demands for a centralized Federal Border Protection

---

<sup>68</sup> See picture, J.B. Johnson, *Divided Village: The Cold War in the German Borderlands* (New York, 2017), p. 50.

<sup>69</sup> E. Sheffer, *Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans made the Iron Curtain* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 37–41; S. Schaefer, *States of Division: Border and Boundary Formation in Cold War Rural Germany* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 38–51.

<sup>70</sup> Schaefer, *States of Division*, p. 46.

<sup>71</sup> Sheffer, *Burned Bridge*, p. 41.

service (*Bundesgrenzschutz*)—a militarized policing body that for nearly 40 years would patrol a border that the Basic Law claimed should not exist.<sup>72</sup> In 1952, East Germany took decisive measures to assert control over its part of the borderlands. ‘Operation Vermin’ (*Aktion Ungeziefer*) involved the conversion of the area adjacent to the border on the Eastern side into security zones, which remained in place (with small modifications) until 1989: the five-kilometre ‘prohibited area’ (*Sperrgebiet*), where residents were registered and visitors required special passes; the 500-metre ‘protection strip’ (*Schutzstreifen*), in which individual residents were granted access only to their own specified section; and the ten-metre ‘control strip’ (*Kontrollstreifen*, portrayed in the West as a ‘death strip’, or *Todesstreifen*), which was cleared of all structures and vegetation. Schaefer stresses that it took time for these measures to be implemented, meaning that it remained possible for years to cross the border illegally in many remote areas. However, the increased criminalization of border-crossing itself made it impossible to engage regularly in economic activity across the demarcation line, disrupting farming in particular and forcing communities on both sides to disentangle land ownership.<sup>73</sup>

For Sheffer and Johnson, the significance of the 1952 border regime changes lay as much in the deportation action itself, which arguably traumatized borderland residents for years to come. Both the name of ‘Operation Vermin’ and the practices associated with it echoed the recent National Socialist past, a fact that Sheffer in particular emphasises: central authorities demanded the removal of political opponents, wealthy individuals, stateless persons, and ‘antisocial’ elements (among others).<sup>74</sup> Johnson is somewhat more reluctant to make Nazi comparisons (referring to the operation by its initial title, *Aktion X*, rather than *Aktion Ungeziefer*), though he points out that deportees quite logically feared they might be sent to concentration camps rather than new homes in the GDR hinterland.<sup>75</sup> Deportations from the borderland were disturbing not only for how they recalled the past, but because their chaotic implementation created fears of an uncertain future. Measures were announced on 26 May 1952, but not implemented for another 24 hours, leaving time for individuals (and in one case an entire village<sup>76</sup>) to flee to the West. Decisions about who to deport were made or reversed in the heat of the moment, and SED members were taken away along with former Nazis. In the rural world, 1952 stood out more than the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, which was accompanied

---

<sup>72</sup> Schaefer, *States of Division*, pp. 28–29; A. Pudlat, ‘Grenzen ohne Polizei – Polizei ohne Grenzen? Überlegungen zu den Ambivalenzen des Schengen-Prozesses’, in M. Gehler and A. Pudlat (eds.), *Grenzen in Europa* (Hildesheim, 2009), pp. 269–303, here pp. 282–283.

<sup>73</sup> Schaefer, *States of Division*, p. 64.

<sup>74</sup> Sheffer, *Burned Bridge*, p. 104.

<sup>75</sup> Johnson, *Divided Village*, 75–79, 83fn24. Thuringian authorities also suggested that wooden planks from Buchenwald concentration camp could be used to build the border fence.

<sup>76</sup> Sheffer, *Burned Bridge*, p. 107.

by further deportations (albeit more limited and more effectively organized ones). When Party agitators (the mansplainers of state socialism) were sent to Mödlareuth and the surrounding county to ‘enlighten’ (*aufklären*) the populace about the Wall, residents in fact wondered aloud why cross-border contact in Berlin had “‘been tolerated this long. It has always been forbidden here’”.<sup>77</sup> Within only a few short years, division had gone from being patchy and chaotic to a normal way of life.

Between 1961 and 1989, the GDR’s border defenses became much more militarized and restrictive. Overall though, it was not so much the technological sophistication of ‘self-firing fences’ that made the border so resilient, but the citizen cooperation that underpinned the border’s social construction—and not only on the Eastern side.<sup>78</sup> Throughout the border’s existence, various actors found ways to turn division, with all its complications, to their advantage. Even before 1952, Bavarian toy manufacturers in Neustadt lost easy access to key suppliers in Sonneberg—but, as Sheffer explains, they also lost their nearest direct competitors. Moreover, they lobbied Western authorities for ‘aggressive protectionism’, accompanied by selective recruitment of skilled workers, which ultimately ‘transferred’ the glassblowing industry on which they depended from East to West.<sup>79</sup> In the agricultural milieu that Schaefer examines, frontier farmers on both sides lost access to land on the other, but this time the relative advantages were reversed. While East Berlin happily redistributed the farmland of escaped or deported residents among the local community (first to collective farms and then to anyone who could maintain agricultural production<sup>80</sup>), Bonn initially refused any compensation to its own citizens, on the premise that doing so would constitute acknowledgment of East Germany and legitimize its land seizures. Regional and local authorities sought to make up for lost land by granting West Germans trusteeship of border fields belonging to farmers who were now east of the demarcation line. However, East Germans made their own arrangements with relatives in the West to take care of their fields, thus greatly reducing the acreage available for the scheme and exacerbating West Germany’s compensation dilemma.<sup>81</sup>

As the border became a normalized and entrenched part of life, Westerners successfully lobbied for special federal borderland subsidies (*Zonenrandförderung*) and turned the GDR’s fortifications into a tourist attraction.<sup>82</sup> After 1961, the agency of East Germans in the prohibited area was severely circumscribed (a fact that Johnson stresses more than Sheffer). They

---

<sup>77</sup> Johnson, *Divided Village*, p. 122.

<sup>78</sup> Sheffer, *Burned Bridge*, pp. 184–187.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62–64.

<sup>80</sup> Schaefer, *States of Division*, 83, 85–6.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 147–151. See also Eckert, ‘Zonal Border’.

nevertheless fought back some of the more egregious incursions into their personal lives, such as curfews, road closures, and demolitions.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, many were more than willing to accept pervasive policing in exchange for the 15 percent salary bonus that went with life in the borderland.<sup>84</sup> Ultimately, citizens in both East and West ‘learned to orient themselves toward the legal and institutional frameworks created by state organizations’, articulating practical, material demands in ways that took advantage of Cold War tensions.<sup>85</sup> Whether they profited individually from division or not, they collectively went along with it, reshaping local realities through resistance, compliance, and the many contradictory strategies in between.

Though these authors disagree on certain points, their arguments are broadly complementary. Sheffer’s thesis that borderland residents on both sides effectively built their own border presents a compelling challenge to traditional, top-down narratives. Schaefer and Johnson distance themselves from some of Sheffer’s more pointed claims largely by stressing regional and local particularities. Schaefer, for instance, argues that Sheffer’s townspeople could afford to choke off their competitors with an ‘economic blockade’, but that farmers in remote areas were far more dependent on cross-border networks for their economic survival. Johnson argues even more forcefully that ‘size matters’: in a tiny village community such as Mödlareuth, the presence of the East German state was more substantial than out in the fields and more overwhelming than in a large town with industry. Effectively, the authors’ disagreements revolve around how questions of scale affected the functioning of the border by changing the balance of power between states on either side, between state and society, and between various local actors. The many forms of compliance that Sheffer emphasizes go hand in hand with the fearful ‘guardedness’ and timid resistance that Johnson identifies in Mödlareuth. Schaefer’s arguments usefully broaden the others’ claims about the inconsistencies of the bordering process by emphasizing the incomplete projection of state power into borderland communities on both sides. Each author thus contributes something important to a general argument that the German-German border was built and undermined by forces from both above and below, with outcomes that varied according to the relative strengths of competing actors at different levels.

#### IV. Migration anxiety in the Schengen area

The opening of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 initiated a process by which the German-German border ultimately disappeared. However, it also intervened in ongoing processes of de-bordering in Western Europe associated with the Schengen Agreement. Signed in

---

<sup>83</sup> Sheffer, *Burned Bridge*, pp. 179–180.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>85</sup> Schaefer, *States of Division*, p. 119.

1985 but not implemented for a decade thereafter, Schengen called for the gradual abolition of border controls among member states, initially meaning France, Germany, the Benelux countries, Spain and Portugal (1995), then Italy and Austria (1997), Greece (2000) and only much later parts of Eastern Europe (2007). The Schengen process is thus characterized by important power asymmetries between East and West that have likewise shaped the discourses of about security and migration that are now connected with ‘Europe’.

As Angela Siebold shows in her highly readable and enlightening study of media discourses surrounding Schengen, ‘open borders’ were not a new idea when Mitterrand and Kohl first announced a joint initiative for them in 1984; indeed, some in the press thought the idea a ‘bluff’, since border controls between France and Germany were already rather minimal.<sup>86</sup> Designed as it was for a ‘Europe’ that ended at the Elbe (in line with the mental maps of the Cold War), Schengen could seem like a symbolically overblown tweak of the status quo. With the fall of the Berlin Wall though, ‘open borders’ took on new meanings and Schengen became more central to European institutions.<sup>87</sup> Openness also became more controversial, with the collapse of the Soviet bloc inspiring fears in Western Europe of a wave of immigration from the East. In part as a result, member states repeatedly postponed implementation of the agreement, first (according to various announcements in the press) from 1986 to 1989, then to the beginning or end of 1992, sometime in 1993, February or perhaps October 1994, and finally 26 March 1995.<sup>88</sup> This evident reluctance to actually go through with reducing border controls led *Süddeutsche Zeitung* columnist Heribert Prantl to pen an ‘obituary’ for the Schengen Agreement in September 1995, after its supposed implementation: ‘The parents never loved their creation, and France finally let it starve to death’.<sup>89</sup>

This drawn-out process was accompanied by negotiations over ‘compensatory measures’ (*Ausgleichsmaßnahmen*) that would increase restrictions on external borders in exchange for relaxing them internally. This constructed a sharp inside/outside dichotomy and set up a zero-sum relationship between ‘mobility’ and ‘security’. At the same time, the repeated implementation delays led to prolonged and protracted debates over the supposed dangers of ‘open borders’. Both Siebold and Andreas Pudlat have examined these debates in detail, with particular attention to police intervention in the media. In Germany, Federal Border Police representatives argued vigorously for the importance of border controls to policing work, insinuating that borderland

---

<sup>86</sup> A. Siebold, *ZwischenGrenzen: Die Geschichte des Schengen-Raums aus deutschen, französischen und polnischen Perspektiven* (Paderborn, 2013), p. 42.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>88</sup> Even then, France remained half-hearted in its commitment, persisting with checks along the Belgian border until 1997. *Ibid.*, pp. 100–115.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 112.

crime rates would soar in the absence of checkpoints. Though border police were concerned primarily about being transferred, demoted, or disbanded, they deployed their ‘security expertise’ to intervene in public debate in ways that stoked fears of borderland ‘criminality’ by ‘Polish car thieves’ and Eastern European gangs: in part as a result, borderland residents became hypersensitive even to low-level crime such as non-organized (i.e. individual) cigarette smuggling and traffic violations.<sup>90</sup> As Andreas Pudlat argues in his work on policing in the Schengen area, it is questionable whether opening borders led to any significant loss of security. Indeed, police were ‘perhaps better positioned [*aufgestellt*] than ever’ after Schengen, empowered by ‘compensatory measures’ that included the creation of Europol and a database shared by European police forces (the Schengen Information System), the institution of more mobile and less visible policing in an enlarged border zone, and new regulations permitting pursuit of criminals across borders.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, as Siebold also demonstrates at length, the delayed and hotly debated implementation of Schengen fueled perceptions of ‘criminality’ that played on longstanding stereotypes about Eastern Europe and, increasingly over time, conflated ‘security’ with migration control.<sup>92</sup>

This was particularly true along the German-Polish border, where openings and closings had been especially vertiginous. In the 1990s, the new securitizing discourse of Schengen combined with older German traditions of anti-Polish resentment and, as several authors have shown, bad memories of socialist experiences.<sup>93</sup> Poland had kept its border to the GDR mostly closed until the 1960s, when both sides selectively opened it for certain kinds of labour and exchange visits. Passport- and visa-free travel was introduced in 1972 as a kind of ‘compensatory measure’ (in partial imitation of Western Europe) to shore up socialist ties in the wake of West German *Ostpolitik*.<sup>94</sup> Some East Germans made the most of this new mobility, but many resented alleged Polish ‘shopping tourism’ that emptied store shelves in Görlitz, Frankfurt an der Oder, and East Berlin.<sup>95</sup> As Agata Ładykowska and Paweł Ładykowski observe, open borders

---

<sup>90</sup> Pudlat, ‘Grenzen ohne Polizei’, p. 296.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 303. See also A. Pudlat, *Schengen: Zur Manifestation von Grenze und Grenzschutz in Europa* (Hildesheim, 2013).

<sup>92</sup> Siebold, *ZwischenGrenzen*, pp. 99–225.

<sup>93</sup> This history is succinctly summarized in A. Ładykowska and P. Ładykowski, ‘Anthropology of Borders and Frontiers. The Case of the Polish-German Borderland (1945-1980)’, in A. Lechevalier and J. Wielgoch (eds.), *Borders and Border Regions in Europe: Changes, Challenges and Chances* (Bielefeld, 2013), pp. 159–182. See also E. Opilowska, *Kontinuitäten und Brüche deutsch-polnischer Erinnerungskulturen: Görlitz-Zgorzelec 1945–2006* (Dresden, 2009), pp. 207–244; D. Jajeśniak-Quast and K. Stokłosa, *Geteilte Städte an Oder und Neiße: Frankfurt (Oder)-Stubice, Guben-Gubin und Görlitz-Zgorzelec 1945-1995* (Berlin, 2000), pp. 63–109.

<sup>94</sup> See C. Osękowski, ‘Der pass- und visafreie Personenverkehr zwischen der DDR und Polen in den siebziger Jahren. Politische, wirtschaftliche und gesellschaftliche Auswirkungen’, in B. Kerski, A. Kotula and K. Wójcicki (eds.), *Zwangsverordnete Freundschaft?: Die Beziehungen zwischen der DDR und Polen 1949-1990* (Osnabrück, 2003), pp. 123–133.

<sup>95</sup> Daniel Logemann has brilliantly shown how some East Germans used their eastward-facing ‘Polish window’ to catch glimpses of a wider world that was otherwise mostly closed off. D. Logemann, *Das polnische Fenster: Deutsch-polnische Kontakte im staatssozialistischen Alltag Leipzigs 1972–1989* (München, 2012).

exacerbated problems in economies that were ‘understood as discrete and bounded systems planned by their respective centers’, where the ‘(unplanned) circulation of goods’ had the potential to create chaos.<sup>96</sup> In 1980, the GDR closed the border again in an attempt both to limit these economic effects and to keep out the ‘Polish bacillus’ of Solidarność.<sup>97</sup> Poles were again able to travel relatively easily through the GDR to West Berlin in the late 1980s, but German unification and European integration turned the Oder-Neisse line back into a hard, external border in the 1990s. At precisely the moment when Eastern Europeans were negotiating entry to the EU, they encountered new restrictions on movement at the reinforced Schengen border.

The eastern border of Schengen continued to ‘wander’ thereafter though, as the title of Steffi Marung’s *Die wandernde Grenze* suggests. Her theory-driven analysis draws on postcolonial influences to show how the ‘European Neighbourhood Policy’ (ENP) was designed to bind adjacent states to EU-determined policies and implicate them in their enforcement. Poland, an accession candidate at the time of the ENP’s formulation, was able to style itself as an intermediary between the expanding EU and eastern neighbours such as Belarus and Ukraine. This role confirmed Poland’s own self-understanding in relation to Eastern Europe, which Marung describes in terms of a ‘civilizing mission’ dating back to the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth.<sup>98</sup> Borrowing a term from Dirk van Laak’s study of German imperialism in Africa, she explores how Ukraine came to serve as ‘complementary space’ (*Ergänzungsraum*) for the EU, with graduated structures of enforcement allowing it to ‘take on functions for the compensation of deficits and the overcoming of crises diagnosed within the Union’—conceived not only in terms of democratization, market liberalization and security, but significantly also in terms of migration control.<sup>99</sup> Marung stops short of calling the EU project ‘imperialist’ though, and argues that institutional ‘Europe’ (*sic*) is not interested in closing itself off so much as selectively steering migration flows (e.g. of skilled labourers for the German economy) to its own advantage. Rather than a ‘wall around the West’, she argues that the ENP has led to external EU borders with ‘walls of varied thickness and gates opened to different degrees’.<sup>100</sup>

The protagonists of Pierre Monforte’s study would probably not agree: for a remarkably broad range of French and German pro-asylum organizations, the idea of a ‘Fortress Europe’ has constituted a shared frame for mobilizing protest. Indeed, he argues that Ministries of the

---

<sup>96</sup> Ładykowska and Ładykowski, ‘Anthropology of Borders’, p. 179.

<sup>97</sup> M. Keck-Szajbel, ‘Shop around the Bloc. Trader Tourism and Its Discontents on the East German-Polish Border’, in P. Bren and M. Neuburger (eds.), *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 374–392, here p. 385; B. Olschowsky, *Einvernehmen und Konflikt: Das Verhältnis zwischen der DDR und der Volksrepublik Polen 1980–1989* (Osnabrück, 2005), p. 37.

<sup>98</sup> S. Marung, *Die wandernde Grenze: Die EU, Polen und der Wandel politischer Räume, 1990–2010* (Göttingen, 2013), pp. 212–229, 348.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344.

Interior in France, Germany, and Italy made the EU their privileged venue for pushing through restrictive immigration policies, not least because this allowed them to circumvent domestic obstacles (courts, opposition parties, protest movements).<sup>101</sup> As a result, pro-asylum groups of every stripe have had to ‘Europeanize’ to contest these policies. Monforte’s primary concern is with debates in the field of social movement studies, where prior scholarship had argued that even protest against EU policies remained rooted in national structures. Instead, he argues that groups in centralist France and federal Germany alike have built Europe-wide networks and challenged EU policies. However, humanitarian organizations like Amnesty International or Secours Catholique are more likely to lobby for their cause in Brussels (partly to get around blockages at the national level), while politicized groups like ‘Act Up’ or ‘Kein Mensch ist illegal’ articulate a more fundamental critique that targets national and European institutions alike.<sup>102</sup> The politicized groups also mobilize more consistently in ‘transnational space’ that links national and European contexts, including in border regions: for example, anti-racist activists in the late 1990s and 2000s organized a series of ‘border camps’ in Rothenburg and Forst (German-Polish border), Zittau (Germany-Poland-Czech Republic), Strasbourg (Germany and France) and near Frankfurt airport (international transit hub).<sup>103</sup> Even well before the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015, refugees and their allies were pushing back against the limits of the ‘inside’/‘outside’ division of Europe that in some sense has replaced old East/West ones.

In the very *longue durée*, discourses surrounding Europe’s territorial boundaries have always been aligned to social divisions of other kinds: as Claudia Bruns argues in her study of myths and maps from Antiquity to the medieval and early Modern periods, borders are layered on top of identities, gender relations, and racial hierarchies that have varied greatly over time. In the early modern period, cartographers superimposed the known physical geography of Europe onto the body of Christ or of the mythical figure Europa, a Phoenician princess supposedly brought to Ancient Greece by Zeus. Europa was depicted as a queen or war goddess by turns, her encounter with Zeus moving from land to sea in the Age of Exploration, and implying desire, seduction, or rape, depending on the gender boundaries of the moment. The continent itself was originally conceived as starting in the East and spreading to the West, but its axis was later flipped to coincide with now all-too-familiar divisions between Orient and Occident; similarly, the ‘barbaric’

---

<sup>101</sup> P. Monforte, *Europeanizing Contention: The Protest against "Fortress Europe" in France and Germany* (New York, 2014), p. 7.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51. See also R. Blumberg and R. Rechitsky, ‘Networks, Place, and Barriers to Cross-Border Organizing: “No Border” Camping in Transcarpathia, Ukraine’, in N.A. Naples and J. Bickham Méndez (eds.), *Border Politics: Social Movements, Collective Identities, and Globalization* (2014), pp. 293–322.



North and ‘civilized’ South of Antiquity have now been inverted in some of the uglier discourses over relations within the Eurozone, particularly between Germany and Greece.<sup>104</sup>

Remembering such reversals might help us relativize Europe’s dismal present state: as Karl Schlögel reminds us, ‘we all have our own Greece and our own ruined investments, built in the belief that things will always continue as they have up to now.’<sup>105</sup> *Grenzland Europa*, a collection of his speeches and essays, underscores just how much Europe has changed since 1989. The ‘big border’ of the Cold War—a border ‘in purest form’, with ‘no ifs, ands or buts’—provided relatively simple coordinates by which most people could orientate themselves.<sup>106</sup> The new Europe is more complex, building on new institutions, but also on the reactivation of once-defunct trade routes and the recontextualization of practices from before 1989. Indeed, the ‘cleverness’ that Eastern Europeans cultivated in order to cope with the problems of the planned economy has left them better-prepared for neoliberal late capitalism than their ‘crisis-inexperienced’ confrères in Western Europe.<sup>107</sup> In Schlögel’s view, the ‘unwinding’ (*Abwicklung*) that began for Eastern Europe in 1989 has spread to the West since 2008. However, despite a pervasive discourse of crisis, ‘There is a Europe that is intact and that works’, one connected less with top-down institutions and treaties (though these have an important role to play) and more with small traders (*Ameisenbändler*), migrant labourers, cheap flights—in short, with circulations and routines that bring Europeans (and non-Europeans!) increasingly into contact.<sup>108</sup> According to Schlögel, Europe is a ‘continent that cannot live without borders’, but these need not be militarized, fear-laden bulwarks against the Other. On a more fundamental level, borders are ‘signs of a wealth of difference’ that we should learn to live with, not least because we would be much the ‘poorer... without the experience of crossing’ them.<sup>109</sup>

## Conclusion

The large body of research being produced on the topic of borders is indicative of a growing interest in the meanings attached to them as barriers to movement, boundaries of belonging, markers of inequality, and limits of state power. The contemporary relevance of much border scholarship is couched in relation to the value of free movement, made all the more meaningful by the eastward expansion of Europe since the end of the Cold War. However, the

---

<sup>104</sup> C. Bruns, ‘Europas Grenzdiskurse seit der Antike. Interrelationen zwischen kartographischem Raum, mythologischer Figur und Europäischer 'Identität'’, in M. Gehler and A. Pudlat (eds.), *Grenzen in Europa* (Hildesheim, 2009), pp. 17–63.

<sup>105</sup> K. Schlögel, *Grenzland Europa: Unterwegs auf einem neuen Kontinent* (München, 2013), p. 17.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 73–74.

<sup>107</sup> Similar arguments can be found elsewhere, including P. Ther, *Die neue Ordnung auf dem alten Kontinent: Eine Geschichte des neoliberalen Europa* (Berlin, 2014).

<sup>108</sup> Schlögel, *Grenzland Europa*, pp. 11–14, 36–38.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 58, 80–81.

positive, citizen-friendly connotations of ‘open borders’ have always coexisted with fears of immigration and insecurity, often tied to deeply rooted stereotypes about people and places outside (Western) Europe. Studies of colonialist thought in the nineteenth century and of media discourses in the twentieth century underscore the long-term continuity of anxieties which have again surged to the forefront of public discourse in the last decade.

National belonging remains a key focus of borderland histories, but the paradigms have shifted. If a previous generation of scholars effectively deconstructed the primordial claims of nationalists by showing how state- and nation-building processes paved over or co-opted existing identities,<sup>110</sup> much of the current literature shows how a plurality of identities remained in circulation long after the apparent consolidation of nation-states. Residents of contested regions might choose from a palette of competing national and regional identities, opting for different ones at different times, or they might simply elect not to choose at all. National indifference was especially prevalent along the highly unstable German-Polish border, where colonization of the frontier, nationalist mobilization, and forced migration ultimately made most options unappetizing for populations on all sides.

One could almost describe Germany’s ‘Iron Curtain’ in similar terms, with some citizens responding to state-building efforts with calculated ambivalence. Instead of identifying with a state ideology, they sought advantage where they could and framed their demands in Cold War terms if and when it suited them. Historians of the German-German border remain preoccupied with relations (and overlaps) between state and society, which have long been a mainstay of the historiography of communism. Recent scholarship has given greater weight to how local populations in both East *and* West constructed, contested, and adapted to Cold War borders, highlighting the role of local people in processes that were once conceived exclusively in terms of high politics. Whether focused on identities, colonialist thinking, the appropriation of space and material culture, or attitudes towards migration, the most widely shared characteristic of current research on borderlands seems to be attention to agency and reception ‘from below’. The best histories in this category are attuned to the ways in which ‘bottom-up’ processes are intertwined with ‘top-down’ and meso-level ones driven by international diplomacy, central states, media elites, and others. Yet local perspectives remain key to perceiving how urban-rural, centre-periphery, and international relations actually played out in reality.

Border historians borrowing from other disciplines have developed sophisticated techniques for working creatively with new and unconventional sources, especially visual ones.

---

<sup>110</sup> E. Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford Calif, 1976); C. Applegate, *A nation of provincials: The German idea of Heimat* (Berkeley, CA, 1990); P. Sahlin, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, 1991); A. Confino, *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871-1918* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997).

Their work incites one to think about how to interpret empty fields, engineering plans, and derelict customs houses in terms of their past and present social implications. Building on the expansion from textual to visual sources, some historians are further incorporating material culture and the natural environment into the history of borders.<sup>111</sup> In terms of approach, there is still room for more cross-fertilization between contexts, disciplines, and languages though. Concepts such as national indifference or the appropriation of space and material culture, so far developed and applied mostly in relation to Eastern Europe, might be used more widely in research on regions like Alsace-Lorraine. Much of the interdisciplinary creativity that has fed into recent research has come from cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and others rooted in the humanities. Geographers, anthropologists, and social scientists have much to say to historians of borders, as demonstrated, for example, by the work they have done together on ‘Phantom Borders’—boundaries that continue to structure social interactions long after their administrative functions have ceased.<sup>112</sup> Likewise, English-speaking scholars can learn more from the many important German contributions to spatial history.<sup>113</sup>

Cross-fertilization and comparison of this kind might have other consequences for the historiography of Germany and for understandings of its place in Europe. As noted above, each of the books reviewed here tends to fit into an existing regional historiography with its own general trends, though related phenomena are visible at each border. By examining different borders together, we can see similarities across time and space in how the borrowing and re-use of symbols, plans, and monuments has led to unintended convergences even in the most violently contested regions. We can see how local populations have employed similar strategies for circumventing, selectively appropriating, or resisting the actions of democratic and authoritarian states alike. And we can see how ‘Europe’ has come together from myriad, contradictory experiences with borders (from the Kaiserreich to state socialism to Schengen), whose enduring legacies complicate simple narratives of progress toward ‘open borders’. Europeanization is ‘not a uniform, unidirectional and teleological process’, and its achievements are subject to reversal.<sup>114</sup> Europe, like its border spaces, is incomplete, unstable, and continually being reconstructed through social practices.

---

<sup>111</sup> See A. Eckert, ‘Geteilt, aber nicht unverbunden. Grenzgewässer als deutsch-deutsches Umweltproblem’, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 62, 1 (2014), pp. 69–99 as well as her forthcoming monograph, tentatively entitled *West Germany and the Iron Curtain*.

<sup>112</sup> B. von Hirschhausen, H. Grandits, C. Kraft, D. Müller and T. Serrier (eds.), *Phantomgrenzen: Räume und Akteure in der Zeit neu denken* (Göttingen, 2015).

<sup>113</sup> See, for example, Löw, *Raumsoziologie*; K. Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit: Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik* (München, 2003).

<sup>114</sup> See U. von Hirschhausen and K.K. Patel, ‘Europeanization in History. An Introduction’, in M. Conway and K.K. Patel (eds.), *Europeanization in the twentieth century: Historical approaches* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 1–18.

The composite and contradictory nature of Europe is evident in the present wave of anti-immigrant hysteria, which has flowed together from multiple, regionally specific sources. Alsace, for example, is not only a laboratory of European collaboration but a bastion of the far-right Front National, whose regional strength draws on resentment against centuries of outside intervention. The anti-immigrant rhetoric of Poland's Prawo i Sprawiedliwość party derives in part from anger over long-standing Western stereotypes of Eastern Europe and from the perception that EU border policies are designed to benefit a historically domineering neighbour. In Germany itself, the fall of the Berlin Wall symbolized the possibilities of 'open borders', but the unification process that followed it led to the devaluation of East Germans' experiences and identities, the drastic curtailment of the right of asylum, and a wave of xenophobic attacks. The shared, Europe-wide discourses currently targeting non-European refugees thus have little to do with the actions of migrants themselves and far more to do with deflecting internal problems onto external borders. As Karl Schlögel writes, 'From societies that cannot cope with themselves, it is not to be expected that they will be up to the challenge of the new, more complex Europe.'<sup>115</sup>

---

<sup>115</sup> „Von Gesellschaften, die mit sich selber nicht fertig werden, ist nicht zu erwarten, dass sie dem neuen, komplexeren Europa gewachsen sein werden.“ Schlögel, *Grenzland Europa*, p. 81.