

Conference Report: Grenzen und Grenzräume im europäischen Vergleich

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Organized by: Berliner Kolleg für Vergleichende Geschichte Europas (BKVGE), Deutsches Historisches Institut (DHI) in Warschau, and the Mission Historique Française en Allemagne (MHFA) in Göttingen; with funding by the Zeit-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius

Report by Winson Chu (University of California, Berkeley)

There has been a recent surge in scholarly interest in territory, and this spatial turn has necessitated a reexamination of borders and border regions. Indeed, the study of civil society and transnationalism over the past decade begs the need to examine borders – not just how they are drawn, but their multiplicity of meaning, their influence, and their usage. The two day workshop provided a forum for junior scholars to examine these problems. Although most papers presented were micro and local studies, the main goal of the conference was to evaluate the possibilities for comparing borders.

The two co-organizers from the BKVGE opened the meeting. The managing director of the BKVGE, Arnd Bauerkämper, outlined the key questions of the workshop: the relationship between cultural, economic, and religious borders before the establishment of state borders; the form and representation of borders; and the interplay between “factual” and constructed characteristics of borders. He stressed the role of borders in constituting identities, and especially how agents use, appropriate, and ascribe them. He emphasized that borders do not just divide peoples, but that they also connect them. Bernhard Struck noted how the increasing study of border regimes in the 1990s has led to a greater understanding of the variable meanings of borders. Hitting upon an overarching theme of the conference, he pointed out that these different borders do not just crosscut, but also reinforce one another. He asked how cultural practices can constitute a border and make it experientable, and why borders often persist in the minds long after their physical dissolution. He emphasized the pioneering nature of the workshop in its attempt to compare borders in Eastern Europe and Western Europe.

The first session focused on the invention and appropriation of borders, in particular on their constructed nature. Andrij Portnov (Dnepropetrovsk) discussed the role of Polish and Russian intellectuals in “inventing Ukraine” in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He examined how Russian elites strove to incorporate the Rus’ population, while Polish authors still considered them to be essentially Polish. Most importantly, Portnov analyzed how Rus’ elites themselves became players in this game by creating a separate Ukrainian identity. He questioned the limits of imagination and invention in nation-building and criticized portrayals of regions and regionalism as benign or even as a panacea against nationalism. Lutz Häfner (Bielefeld) examined Siberia as Russia’s eastern frontier. Siberia became the “barbaric East” that legitimated Russian expansion and provided a civilizing mission that would compensate for Russia’s own peripheral role in the European state system. Häfner also explored the border’s multiple meanings, including the association of the Siberian frontier with freedom. Stephanie Schlesier (BKVGE) discussed how the

annexation of Lorraine by the German Empire created a new French-German border, but also how the old border created in 1815 between Prussia and France continued to persist in the minds of the local population. An “invisible border” thus existed between the local “new Germans” and the “old Germans” who arrived in the annexed territory. Although Reich officials tried to make the new border with France more visible and initiated policies to Germanize the population, the refusal to recognize the new border was often expressed in the defacement of border markers. Torben Kiel (Greifswald) assessed the attempt to turn the German Confederation into a German nation-state during the 1848 debates at the Paulskirche in Frankfurt. Kiel compared notions of “Germany” towards one territory that was formally in German Confederation (the Duchy of Limburg) and another territory that was not (the Grand Duchy of Posen). Kiel argued that his examples show that the debates gravitated towards turning the *Sprachnation* into the *Staatsvolk*. Manfred Hildemeier (Göttingen/BKVGE) commented on the session’s focus on the incongruity of political borders with social, economic, and linguistic ones. All papers in the session dealt with the attempt to impress a new border upon the local population. He raised the problem of comparing borders when each border represents a unique constellation. He also asked how narratives that legitimate borders persist, even when purported differences appear to disappear or dwindle. Questions from participants focused on varying perceptions of landscape in East and West and how border changes – or attempts to bring them about – create new peripheries and nationalist movements in turn. The discussion also included the gendered aspects of borders, border signifiers and rituals, and the issue of whether “invisible borders” last longer than political ones.

The second session discussed the interaction of scholarship with the drawing of borders. Monika Baar (Essex) analyzed the role of historians in East Central Europe and their attempts to nationalize territories and borders. She criticized the inherent assumptions of backwardness in Eastern European scholarship and its purported imitation of the Western European historiography. In her analysis of works by František Palacký for the Czech lands and Mihail Kogălniceanu for Romania, she emphasized the common characteristics in east and west, including the naturalization of borders, the importance of geography as argument, and how the establishment of nation-states created the need for teleological narratives of national unity. Riccardo Bavaj (St Andrews) discussed the attempt to redraw Prussian administrative borders during the Weimar Republic. Expansion plans by the Province of Hanover provoked officials in the neighboring Province of Westphalia to come up with new justifications for its continued existence. Scholars such as Hermann Aubin, who led the “Institut für geschichtliche Landeskunde der Rheinlande”, criticized the previous dynastic basis for borders as artificial and argued for new borders based on cultural categories. This ethnic cartography within the German nation was part of the “Kulturraumforschung” that legitimated the creation of new German borders – both within and outside the borders of the Weimar Republic. Kerstin Jobst (Hamburg) discussed Russian conceptions of Crimea before the First World War. She argued that Russians saw the Crimea as a terra incognita, but also as genuinely Russian and an inseparable part of the Russian Empire. The civilization vs. barbarism discourse “orientalized” the Crimea and justified Russian ownership. The successful “reacquisition” of this territory and its inhabitants, whereby confession was a more important marker than putative ethnic or racial characteristics, became an integral part of the national narrative and self-image of the Russian center. In her commentary, Morgane Labbé (Paris) discussed the common theme of inventing a usable past that not only justified

conquest, but also created a sense of harmony in the national narrative. She stressed the need to examine the dialogue between in-country parties and international networks in making new borders possible. Participants' questions criticized concepts of cultural transfer that see the putative recipients as backwards and passive objects, rather than as active agents. The discussion also centered on the need to part with oversimplified notions of center and periphery, and whether Orientalism had outlived itself as an analytic tool.

The third session covered the perception, experience and symbolic use of borders. Martina Krocová (BKVGE) examined the border between Saxony and Bohemia in travel writings from the first half of the nineteenth century. In particular, she looked at the attempt of Austrian officials to increase the presence of their outer borders. Although the mostly well-read, Protestant travelers were aware of the purpose of borders and expected to see differences, the borders being crossed were not just political, but class, linguistic, and confessional as well. Krocová concluded that the travelers who traveled from Saxony to Bohemia still tended to perceive themselves entering Bohemia, and not Austria. Martin Klatt (Aabenraa) examined the multiplicity of borders in Schleswig since 1800. Here, cultural, national and social borders intersected between the German-speaking population of Flensburg and the Danish countryside. Social mobility and Germanization policies of the German Empire led to a steady decline of the Danish language, but there were also revivals of Danishness in crisis periods. Klatt argues that the 1920 border that divided Schleswig has hardened, as the lack of success in creating a cross-border Euro-Region attest. Günter Riederer (Marbach am Neckar) looked at the struggle for cultural hegemony between France and Germany at the Col de la Schlucht in Alsatia. After the annexation of Alsatia by the German Empire, there was an attempt to "nationalize" this contested region, with mixed success. German tourists who came to the region often exoticized the French-German divide, and many who crossed the border to France were often disappointed when they failed to experience the "other." For the local population, the border had little acceptance, and symbols of the German state were frequently vandalized. Markus Krzoska (Mainz) examined the nineteenth century transformation of loyalties, interests and groups in the Egerland, now the region around Cheb in the Czech Republic. During the revolution of 1848 as well as in the 1897 Badeni decrees that gave the Czech language equal status in Bohemia and Moravia, German-speaking leaders succumbed to the fear of becoming dominated by Czechs. The permeable border with the German Empire also made them susceptible to the Pan-German league, and there was a discernible increase in "German themes" in political discussion. Thus, the political borders with Bavaria and Saxony (and with the German Empire in general) steadily diminished in importance vis-à-vis the new mental borders against the Czechs. In his commentary, Christophe Duhamelle (MHFA) stressed the need to analyze agency in shaping borders, which are complex and never complete. There should be further investigation of how borders are used for political or economic gain, to satisfy a sense of exoticism and danger, or to play with the authority of the state. He suggested looking at how borders change over time, and their cultural role in pilgrimages and marital strategies. In the discussion, there were concerns regarding the use of the term "hybridity," which as a metonym reifies concepts of pure national essences. There were questions about whether identities are indeed so arbitrary, and whether there should be more focus on time and place in the formation of identities. There was also a discussion about center and periphery in

cultural homogenization, and how regionalizing and nationalizing processes complement or exclude one another.

The fourth session dealt with exclusion, foreignness, and conflict. Astrid Küntzel (Freiburg) examined the introduction of a passport system in the city of Cologne, which was a frontier city in Napoleon's France. In particular, she analyzed the categories of citizens and foreigners in a period marked by war and the fear of espionage, and how the population responded to these national categories. Küntzel argued that the regulations were both demoralizing and unable to encompass the socio-economic diversity of the city, but the local population was able to create a practical co-existence with this border. Local actors were thus crucial in enforcing the territorial sovereignty of the state, but they could also push their economic interests as well. The Rhine did not act as a natural border, but was one that had to be constructed continuously. Celia Donert (Florence) analyzed the introduction of new types of governance in regard to the Roma in interwar Czechoslovakia, and how these exclusionary measures in turn shaped social practice. Czechoslovakian authorities saw itinerant Roma groups as a growing problem, and the fear of the "International Gypsy" led to the 1927 "Nomadic Gypsy Law" as well as the "Moldova Trial," which involved rumors of Roma cannibalism. Donert argued that the use of sophisticated criminal research using anthropometric measurements led to an "identity paradigm," while regional cooperation among otherwise mutually antagonistic neighbors was an example of "illiberal internationalism." Oliver Schulz (Düsseldorf) explored the spread of national identities in Bessarabia after the Russian Empire acquired the territory from the Ottomans in 1815. Russian authorities were largely successful at coopting local elites, and ethnic relations in the imperial setting remained relatively peaceful. The establishment of the Romanian nation-state in 1859 led to calls for a greater Romania, which increased nationalist tensions. Jews were the most vulnerable group in this nationalizing process, and there was an Easter pogrom in 1903. Although Bessarabia was later annexed by Romania after the First World War, Schulz argues that identities in Bessarabia were still far from being finished, and the Romanian path was far from being the only viable solution. Margarita Aleksakhina (Leipzig) discussed how modernization processes affected nation-building in the case of the Russian minority in interwar Estonia. Estonian nationalists in this period were more concerned with the influence of the Baltic German elites than with the Russians, to whom the Estonians felt culturally superior. The Estonian response to the Russians was less antagonistic and more heterogeneous. As Aleksakhina argues, the Russian population was too diverse and divided to be considered a minority community, and the borders between majority and minority remained fluid before the Second World War began. Andreas Kossert commented on how the papers in the session highlighted various forms of alterity, be they socio-political or ethnic. He stressed the comparability of these cases, and he asked how anti-Roma sentiment could stand in for anti-Semitism, as the similarities between charges of cannibalism and ritual murder showed. The discussion centered on the notion of unfinished identities, and the role of pressure from below and from the periphery in pushing for tougher measures against minorities and foreigners.

A final roundtable discussion with Arnd Bauerkämper, Christophe Duhamelle, and Andreas Kossert stressed the need to continue the comparative study of borders, for such works reveal the complexity of border regimes. They noted, however, that an east-west comparison must not necessarily create an east-west dichotomy. They

reiterated the importance of examining the multiple meanings, perceptions, and usages of borders, and in particular how these change over time. The organizers are planning the publication of a conference volume. The program can be viewed at: <http://web.fu-berlin.de/bkvge/>