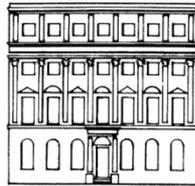


German Historical Institute London



BULLETIN

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Christina Neuberger and Larissa Kraft:

*Contested Borders? Practising Empire, Nation, and Region in the Nineteenth
and Twentieth Centuries*

Conference Report

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Contested Borders? Practising Empire, Nation, and Region in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. International conference organized by Levke Harders (Bielefeld University) and Falko Schnicke (German Historical Institute London), and held at the GHIL, 26–28 April 2018.

‘Contested borders’ is a topic that even, or perhaps especially, today is of immense importance, as all around the globe borders are (re)-defined, weakened, or strengthened. Borders are intended to limit, but they can also change, and have done so throughout history. This conference examined the question of contested borders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, taking into account different types of boundaries between empires, states, nations, and regions. It aimed to define ‘belonging’ as a research concept while exploring ‘the region’ as a research category and combining this perspective with nation-state and postcolonial perspectives. It also aimed to use trans-regional and transnational approaches. How are inclusion and exclusion created not only by physical, but also by mental borders? What conflict lines are thus revealed, and what actors help to create belonging by creating borders? These and other questions were discussed in seven sessions and two keynote lectures. The conference’s potential for innovation could be seen in this linking of regional questions with international perspectives; and many of the papers focused not only on how borders are (passively) perceived, but also on how they enable active agency, showing how historic actors reacted to, created, or subverted them.

The first session focused on the conceptualization of identity and belonging. Rather than giving answers, Timothy Baycroft (Sheffield) raised questions, presenting five models of belonging: Imagined Communities (1983), Invention of Traditions (1983), Concentric Circles (1989), Hierarchies of Otherness (2001), and Assimilation and

Trans. Emily Richards (GHIL).

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The full conference programme can be found under ‘Events and Conferences’ on the GHIL’s website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

Appropriation (2008). While these models were originally developed in historical studies dealing with relatively stable borders, the paper asked to what extent they are challenged when applied to an area of contested borders.

Taking the spatial turn in historical research as a starting point, Ursula Lehmkuhl (Trier) discussed practices of place-making and place-related belonging with reference to the Red River Settlement of the Canadian Métis that was Europeanized in the nineteenth century. Her paper introduced transcultural space as an outcome of place-making shaped by the actors within it and their interactions. She especially emphasized the importance of conflicting narratives used by opposing groups to create belonging and to claim spaces for themselves, thus constructing a 'homeland'. The subsequent discussion stressed the fact that areas with migratory movements are always areas of conflict in terms of politics and belonging.

The second session discussed representational border crossings in the context of British royal travel. Cindy McCreery (Sydney), whose topic was the British Imperial Royal Tour of 1901, chose not to focus on the crossing of actual political borders. Instead, she examined the significance of spatial, racial, and technological borders and their infringement. The traditional narrative of a seemingly endless journey through British and, therefore, in a sense, 'home' territory gave way, in her re-telling, to the sense of unfamiliarity and uncertainty that dominated each participant's view of events. In terms of racial border crossings, she especially highlighted the fact that the areas visited on the tour turned out to be far less 'foreign' than the travellers had anticipated.

Falko Schnicke (London) analysed the first post-Independence state visit by the Queen to India and Pakistan in 1961. He examined the United Kingdom's attempts to find an appropriate way of dealing with its colonial past and honouring the independence of the new states, while at the same time using the visit ostentatiously to demonstrate a united Commonwealth front in the context of the escalating Cold War. One particularly fascinating aspect of the visit was the route, as the Queen travelled first to northern India then, interrupting her state visit to India, crossed into Pakistan before returning to India again. Schnicke interpreted this as a strategic decision, designed to show the need for peace and unity within the Commonwealth.

The first keynote lecture, delivered by Floya Anthias (London), again touched upon the question of belonging, but from a sociological

perspective. Starting from the recent debate about the 'Windrush generation', she introduced and discussed various arguments that, in her opinion, shape the general debate about migration and belonging in the United Kingdom. She eventually proposed that the term 'belonging' should not be used as a substitute for 'identity', but should be seen as a mode that is framed by political and normative uses.

The third session featured two different approaches to the concepts of belonging, nation, and boundaries. Michael Rowe (London) studied the Rhineland in the nineteenth century as an area of contested borders with several conflict lines running through it. However, although Rowe defined the Rhineland as a 'war zone' with all the negative implications of that term, he also argued that the Rhinelanders living within the region could profit from these conflicts. War could not only be a source of employment, for example, in infrastructure projects and fortress building, but could also lead to investments in cultural heritage. Conflicts were thus also a force that contributed to the creation of belonging.

Maiken Umbach (Nottingham) presented the history of the Jewish diaspora after emigration from Nazi Germany as a de-centred German history, arguing that the process of emigration was perceived, at least by some Jews, as part of the German migration. She supported this argument with findings from a German Jewish emigrant family's photographic archive that present a picture of the family as active German migrants going to America, and not as passive Jewish victims. She argued that the process of emigration did not necessarily lead to the shattering of secure identities, but could result in the formation of an imagined 'German identity' that was no longer framed by the nation-state. Despite the apparent differences between Rowe's and Umbach's papers, the discussion showed that both revealed adaptation to new circumstances, and that in both cases multiple layers of identity that help with the process of adaptation can be detected.

The papers presented in the fourth session dealt with questions of belonging and otherness that influence the treatment of migrants in areas where there are contested borders. In her case study of Alsatian migrant Simon Altschul, Levke Harders (Bielefeld) put forward the hypothesis that borders were created not only by states, but also by the migrants themselves, thus stressing the importance of imagined borders. Factors such as class, kinship, local and regional interests, and religion played a part when decisions about the naturalization of

migrants had to be made. As a result, not only state norms but also local administrative traditions and their contestation led to concepts of bordering, belonging, and region- and nation-building.

Anne Winter (Brussels) also stressed the importance of local administration in her case study of the early years of the Kingdom of Belgium, concentrating on Antwerp and Brussels. Her twofold approach to the topic focused first on the interaction between national and local authorities in decisions about the status of migrants. Second, she highlighted that groups of migrants were variously perceived as 'more' or 'less' familiar or different in their 'otherness', leading to differences in how they were treated. The interaction of these factors led to a treatment of non-national migrants based on local perceptions of belonging and deserving. The discussion again touched upon the role of the local in migration decisions, coming to the conclusion that the importance of the nation-state was (in part) diminished, while local and rural traditions were extremely important for questions of belonging.

The fifth session was dedicated to border practices. Benjamin Hopkins (Washington) presented his thesis that the border regions of former empires which are plagued by violence and instability, such as the activities of terrorist groups in Kenya, Pakistan, and Nigeria, are historically defined by their liminality. All three countries named, formerly border regions of the British Empire, were subject to similar border practices, which made these regions particularly vulnerable. While at one level they were left to fend for themselves, on another level they were still in a dependent relationship with the imperial system.

Sarah Frenking (Göttingen) looked at how new border practices were adopted on the German-French border in Altmünsterol (French Montreux-Vieux) in southern Alsace around 1900. She focused on the question of how far local actors, especially the border police, were responsible for creating the frontier between Germany and France, both engaged in nation-building during this period. From 1888, new surveillance and monitoring practices that were quantitatively and qualitatively quite different from what had existed before were put in place at the border. The new practices were implemented by the police but discussed widely, especially in newspapers, which meant that the public became far more aware of the border. This forced people to deal with the issue of their own territoriality, a subject which is inextricably bound up with questions of belonging and its definition.

In the second keynote lecture, Philip Murphy (London) looked at the issue of British nationality on the basis of the various Nationality and Immigration Acts passed in the UK since 1945 and how they were negotiated within the Conservative Party. The struggle to create legislation that adequately reflects historical reality in the context of a former empire is echoed in the discussions which have been going on for decades, at both political and public level, about what British nationality actually is. These discussions reveal that the lack of a definition of 'British nationality' is problematic, which in turn highlights that nationality and citizenship are by no means the same thing.

The sixth session, on (post)colonial regions, turned to Africa. Julio Decker (Bristol) characterized German colonial rule in German South-West Africa between 1884 and 1914 as both spatial ordering and a spatial regime. The German idea of an 'empty' space, as Namibia was perceived to be, led to a spatial ordering based on German ideals in which 'emptiness' was to be filled productively with a new infrastructure (including railways), the building of concentration camps, and educating the native population to embrace German virtues. In practice, however, this meant responding brutally whenever the native workers rebelled against what were often fatally dangerous working conditions.

Anne-Isabelle Richard (Leiden) discussed the question of African-European commonalities in the African-European debates of the 1940s from a postcolonial perspective. At the heart of these was the idea of 'Eurafrica', based on the notion of a particular connection between Europe and Africa as a result of (colonial) history. In the 1940s the representatives of African nations used European institutions, such as the Consultative Assembly, as a platform to demonstrate that 'European' values such as democracy and human rights should not be limited to Europe, singling out France in particular in their arguments. The 'Eurafrica' vision included geopolitical and economic considerations, but most importantly, it raised questions of belonging and equality in relation to Africa and Europe.

The last session of the conference dealt with questions of empire and imperialism from two different perspectives. Amanda Behm (York) examined the dominating character of 'Britishness' in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century California. She explored settler campaigns and the rise of anti-colonialism as two key processes for positioning California within the Anglo-Saxon world on the one

hand, and creating a notion of exclusion on the other. Ultimately, she argued, the British rule in India, which was acknowledged and observed in practice by the anti-colonial South Asian diaspora in California, showed itself as un-British, especially in the treatment of non-white migrant groups.

Almuth Ebke (Mannheim) followed British imperialism into the late twentieth century, viewing events of 1981, especially the riots of April and July in several English cities and the introduction of the British Nationality Act, as drivers of public debates about questions of belonging, especially in terms of what 'Britishness' was supposed to mean. She traced the various concepts of belonging discussed at the conference and came to the conclusion that they reflected a division within British politics and society, where the term 'British' is applied to differing concepts of belonging, nationality, and society simultaneously. During the discussion it was pointed out that the term 'Britishness' is problematic, and will probably continue to be so, as different actors may not necessarily share the same understanding.

The conference discussed borders from a variety of perspectives. Often, rather than political borders, this meant social, cultural, racial, or emotionally perceived borders and transgressions and their significance in terms of inclusion and exclusion. Over the course of the conference, it became clear that the idea of 'belonging' is at the heart of many of our questions about borders. The conference focused both on regions as geographical units and the supranational level, calling on historians to think beyond regional and national approaches and to include a trans-regional point of view in their work. Generally, it could be seen that much current research takes a micro-historical approach ('history from below'). The question of practices, whether in crossing borders, in place-making, or belonging, was discussed many times.

One important aspect that was not covered was a theoretical consideration of the term 'border' itself, and how this differs from similar concepts such as 'frontier' or 'boundary'. Discussions often did not stop to clarify exactly what was meant by 'borders', as the 'psychology' of the border was generally of more interest in the context of the specific research projects under discussion. A publication of selected papers is planned.

CHRISTINA NEUBERGER (Heidelberg) and LARISSA KRAFT (Passau)