

Decentering Modern German History à l'américaine: A Look at the French Historiography

Sandrine Kott

EVERY good humanities journal emerges from and is produced by a specific scientific community that shapes its content and its style. *Central European History* (*CEH*) is no exception. For me, i.e., a French historian of Germany teaching at a Swiss university in Geneva, *CEH* is the journal to read in order to follow the more recent and innovative English-language scholarship on the history of Germany and German-speaking countries. Most of the articles published in the journal are written by historians based in the United States or in the United Kingdom (and its dominions), and most of the books that are reviewed originate from the same community, with the notable exception of ones by German authors.

With few exceptions, the journal does not refer to historiography written in languages other than English or German. This is not a criticism; it would be beyond the reach of a single journal to take into account everything published on Central Europe in all possible languages. This essay is nevertheless a reminder that there is also a rich and wide French-language historiography on German history. It looks at the peculiarities of this research and what one can learn from it. This is not intended as a plea for a specific “national” brand. In the first place, I do not feel particularly bound to this “French brand.” I certainly owe a great deal of my own training in the social sciences to my education and scientific socialization in France, but I have never been a long-time fellow in one of the French institutes in Germany. My encounters with German history were through German institutions and with German historians whom I met at the University of Bielefeld, the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung in Potsdam, the Humboldt University in Berlin, and elsewhere, as well as through exchanges with British and US colleagues. I nevertheless believe that this French historiography is of interest not just because it has produced a good deal of solid research, but also because it is an illuminating example of how given social, political, and scientific contexts can have an impact on historiography. It is only by considering these contexts that one can better grasp the specificity of the French historiography—and, at the same time, begin thinking about that of the United States and *CEH*.

As is the case for all historians, French historians who choose to embark on the study of modern Germany face a personal and collective past that is the remnant and often painful history of the tortuous relationship between the two countries. For that reason, the French historiography of Germany has often been and still is largely a “relational history.” This continues to be encouraged by a large set of institutions that are often jointly funded by the respective ministries of foreign affairs in the two countries. To put it bluntly, French historians of Germany are part of the cultural diplomacy network—which is also often the very object of their studies. As a result, a large segment of French writing on German history is in the area of Franco-German diplomatic relations. This has taken the

form of classical political diplomacy, as well as economic or cultural diplomacy.¹ Some are commissioned or supported by the Comité d'études des relations franco-allemandes (Cerfa), which was set up in 1954 between the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the West German Foreign Office. This is one of the many ways in which political agencies tried—if not always successfully—to set the agenda for historical research in this field.

There are, however, more complicated layers and expressions of this “relational history,” as documented in the classic study by Claude Digeon, a professor of French literature: *La crise allemande de la pensée française, 1870–1914*, which appeared in 1959 but has never been translated. Placing the origin of the nature of this complicated intellectual relationship in the period following the French defeat of 1871, Digeon attributes the roots of the fascination of many French intellectuals for Germany to the anxiety caused by the rising political and intellectual power of the new neighboring nation-state. This served as an incentive to develop historical research on Germany, in the sense of “knowing one’s enemy.” Besides fear, French intellectuals also had a genuine interest in and admiration for German achievements at the end of the nineteenth century; this was especially true of French socialists. One of them—the historian Albert Thomas, who would later become the first director of the International Labor Organization—published a historical study on the German trade unions, which were, in his opinion, a model of strength and solid organization.² Germany became, more generally, a model of good and effective organization, but also a place that provided a deep understanding of the social balance of power in industrial societies. In his study on Rhineland liberalism written at the end of the 1930s, Jacques Droz—by then, one of the most influential French historians of Germany—purposely highlighted the “good” liberal German tradition.³

The end of World War II marked the beginning of another era in this relational history. Since the 1950s, a need and a longing for reconciliation and friendship has shaped relations between the two countries. The French historian Joseph Rovon, born in Munich as Joseph Rosenthal, is one of the leading figures involved in this historiography of reconciliation, which corresponded with the political agenda of European construction.⁴ Strasbourg, one of the European capital cities, was and still is both a symbol and a site for that reconciliation. The University of Strasbourg, richly funded by the German kaiser when Strasbourg became the capital of the German *Reichsland*, remains one of the most important centers for the study of German history. The *Revue d'Allemagne et des pays de langue allemande*, the most important French journal entirely devoted to the study of the history of the Germanic regions since the eighteenth century (with articles in German), could not exist without the material support of the University of Strasbourg and its personnel. Many other centers supported by public agencies in both countries also offer opportunities to study the history of Germany. Young French

¹See, e.g., Corine Defrance and Ulrich Pfeil, eds., *Le traité de l'Élysée et les relations franco-allemandes, 1945-1963-2003* (Paris: CNRS éd, 2005); Françoise Berger, *La France, l'Allemagne et l'acier (1932–1952): de la stratégie des cartels à l'élaboration de la CEEA* (Atelier national de reproduction des thèses, 2001); Sylvain Schirmann and Raymond Poidevin, *Les relations économiques et financières franco-allemandes, 1932–1939* (Vincennes: Institut de la gestion publique et du développement économique, 2013); Corine Defrance, *L'influence française sur la rive gauche du Rhin: fondements politiques de l'action culturelle de la France en Allemagne, 1945–1955* (Atelier national de reproduction des thèses, 1993).

²Albert Thomas, *Le Syndicalisme allemand, résumé historique (1848–1903)* (Paris: G. Bellais, 1903).

³Jacques Droz, *Le Libéralisme rhénan 1815–1848, contribution à l'histoire du libéralisme allemand*, ed. Université de Paris (Paris: F. Sorlot, 1940).

⁴Joseph Rovon, *France-Allemagne: deux nations, un avenir* (Paris: Julliard, 1988).

historians who wish to go to Germany now have access to a dense web of funding and hosting institutions: the Centre d'étude et de recherche interdisciplinaire sur l'Allemagne (CIERA) in Paris; the Institut historique franco-allemand in Frankfurt am Main, which replaced the Mission Historique in Göttingen, founded in 1973; and, since 1990, the Franco-German Center for Social Sciences, Centre Marc Bloch, in Berlin, are the most important ones among a myriad of institutions. These French centers are closely linked to German partner institutions and have contributed to a hybridization of scholarly production and milieu. In the last decades, several French historians have obtained long-term positions in Germany.⁵ The reverse has also happened, though considerably less frequently than is the case in the United States.

What one may term “reconciliation historiography” has produced a wide web of historical studies that look at the various forms of entanglement between France and Germany. The *Manuel d'histoire franco-allemand*, a high school history textbook for German and French students, as well as the eleven volumes of the Franco-German history published in French and German, are cornerstones of this interconnected historiography.⁶ They are the most visible result of a very large body of work that has identified various ways of studying the connections between both countries. This includes the study of how each represents the other (including the production of images or stereotypes), as well as the study of actual exchanges of cultural goods.⁷ It is worth noting that wars and occupations have recently become fruitful periods for highlighting the previously unknown dimensions of such connections. The Napoleonic wars and, more recently, World War II have been used at laboratories for getting at a new kind of “connected” history.⁸ Renewed approaches to the study of French forced workers in Germany and of German prisoners-of-war in France testify to the latter.⁹

Besides producing new forms of knowledge, this “relational study” has launched fruitful methodological discussions that have further nurtured the field of history as a whole. The 1990s were especially productive in this regard: Franco-German historical workshops, often held in both languages, led to articles and collective essays on the heuristic gains of historical comparison, with a strong focus on social and economic history.¹⁰ To overcome some methodological shortcomings of the comparative approach and, in particular, the impossibility of translating certain concepts and social patterns, cultural historians have pleaded for a

⁵This includes Etienne François at the Free University in Berlin, Thomas Serrier at the Viadrina University in Frankfurt/Oder, and Bénédicte Savoy at the Technical University in Berlin.

⁶François Étienne, “Le manuel franco-allemand d'histoire. Une entreprise inédite,” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 2, no. 94 (2007) : 73–86. For the “Deutsch-französische Geschichte,” see <https://www.dhi-paris.fr/fr/publications/deutsch-franzoesische-geschichte.html>.

⁷See Stephanie Krapoth, *France—Allemagne: représentations réciproques (1918–1965). Manuels scolaires et journaux satiriques* (Saarbrücken: Editions universitaires européennes, 2010) ; Élise Julien, *Paris, Berlin: la mémoire de la guerre, 1914–1933* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009) ; Michel Espagne, *Les transferts culturels franco-allemands* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1999).

⁸Bénédicte Savoy, *Patrimoine annexé: les biens culturels saisis par la France en Allemagne autour de 1800* (Paris: Éd. de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2003).

⁹Patrice Arnaud, *Les STO: histoire des Français requis en Allemagne nazie, 1942–1945* (Paris: CNRS éd, 2014). As Andrew Port noted in his “Letter from the Editor,” the only recent French-language book reviewed in *CEH* was Imlay Talbot's review in *CEH* 50, no. 2 (2017) of Fabien Théofilakis, *Les prisonniers de guerre allemands: France, 1944–1949* (Paris : Fayard, 2014).

¹⁰Sandrine Kott and Thierry Nadau, “Pour une pratique de l'histoire sociale comparative. La France et l'Allemagne contemporaines,” *Genèses, sciences sociales et histoire* 17 (1994): 103–11.

methodological shift and embarked on a historical study of transfers.¹¹ From a sociocultural perspective, they have closely studied groups of mediators, such as translators and collectors.¹² Some spaces have received privileged attention in order to highlight and study such interconnections—in particular, borderlands, which have recently been rediscovered by historians more generally. The Saarland-Lorraine-Luxemburg region, cities like Cologne, and regions such as Alsace and Baden have been fruitful laboratories for highlighting flows, encounters, and various forms of hybridity between both countries.¹³ These kinds of study have often been conducted by binational research teams supported by Franco-German cofunding.¹⁴

These methodological discussions have nurtured historical methodological reflection in general, but what does the French historiography offer to the field of German history? At the same time, and looking with an eye to journals like *Central European History*, can one identify deviations from major scholarly developments in the field emanating from the United States? In the first place, and in terms of chronology, there has been, as in the United States, a pronounced chronological shift of sorts.¹⁵ Even if the study of nineteenth-century German history has not completely dried up, many scholars who used to work on the *Kaiserreich* have moved to the twentieth century and, more recently, to the second half of the twentieth century, especially with the rise of interest in East German history.¹⁶ As in the United States and elsewhere, Nazism has attracted a great deal of attention—partly in response to real social and editorial demands.¹⁷ At the same time, the French historiography has contributed new perspectives to the field of modern German history—for example, the “sites-of-memory” approach that began with the French historian Pierre Nora, which was subsequently exported to German history as a Franco-German joint venture of sorts that was then appropriated by German historians of the German Democratic Republic (GDR).¹⁸

¹¹Gérard Noiriel and Michel Espagne, “Transferts culturels: l'exemple franco-allemand. Entretien avec Michel Espagne,” *Genèses. Sciences sociales et histoire* 8 (1992): 146–54.

¹²Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, *Les avant-gardes artistiques: 1918–1945. Une histoire transnationale* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017).

¹³My own PhD thesis on Alsace has further inspired my work on the German social state; also see the recent contributions of Catherine Maurer, including *La ville charitable: les œuvres sociales catholiques en France et en Allemagne au XIXe siècle* (Paris: les Éd. du Cerf, 2012); Pierre Ayçoberry, *Cologne entre Napoléon et Bismarck, la croissance d'une ville rhénane* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1981). Also see the ongoing project Saar-Lorr-Lux at <http://www.memotransfront.uni-saarland.de/>.

¹⁴This is supported by grants from the French Agence nationale de la recherche and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, which has led to publications such as Christophe Charle, Jürgen Schriewer, and Peter Wagner, eds., *Transnational Intellectual Networks: Forms of Academic Knowledge and the Search for Cultural Identities* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2004).

¹⁵See Andrew I. Port, “*Central European History* since 1989: Historiographical Trends and Post-Wende Turns,” *Central European History* 48, no. 2 (2015): 238–48.

¹⁶For the French historiography on the Federal Republic, see, e.g., Hélène Miard Delacroix, *Willy Brandt* (Paris: Fayard, 2013); Jean Solchany, *Wilhelm Röpkke, l'autre Hayek: aux origines du néolibéralisme* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2015).

¹⁷See, e.g., Johann Chapoutot, *La révolution culturelle nazie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016); Michel Fabreguet, *Mauthausen: camp de concentration national-socialiste en Autriche rattachée, 1938–1945* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999); Christian Ingrao, *La promesse de l'Est: espérance nazie et génocide, 1939–1943* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2016); Marie-Bénédicte Daviet-Vincent, *Le nazisme: régime criminel* (Paris: Perrin, 2015).

¹⁸Étienne François and Hagen Schulze, eds., *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, 3 vols. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2005). A selection has been published in French in *Mémoires allemandes*, trans. Bernard Lortholary and Jeanne

The French-language historiography of the GDR has occasionally been labeled the “French school” of GDR history, with an eye to the peculiarity of a “French touch” grounded in both methodological choices and political contexts. Two things must be kept in mind to understand the interest for GDR history in France, as well as the ways in which French GDR history differs from its (West) German counterpart and, less so, from the American variant. In the first place, the GDR’s existence was not really considered a threat by the French people, as it was in the Federal Republic; on the contrary, the GDR was “another Germany” whose very existence ensured France’s own peace and tranquility. When the GDR still existed, there was a lively interest in this “other” Germany, supported by associations such as “France RDA,” which encouraged cultural encounters between French and East German citizens. Contrary to common belief, this association attracted some Gaullists and was *not* a communist agency. Second, this interest had and has to do with the influence of communism in France, which remained important through the 1970s. Communist historians of Germany have always shown a marked interest in the socialist German state, and, even before the so-called *Wende*, GDR history had already existed as a subfield in France.¹⁹ Moreover, while anticommunist sentiments did exist in France, they did not assume the extreme and exclusive forms that they did in the Federal Republic and the United States. Given the number of cities governed by the French Communist Party, communism was considered through the 1980s to be a banal, everyday experience—one not necessarily associated with political dictatorship. French scholars who researched the GDR after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 had a similarly “detached” interest in communism. Rather than being a “peculiar” aspect of German history, or a mere “footnote” of the latter, the GDR was a fruitful terrain to be studied by those who sought to understand not just the reality of a communist regime, but also what communism revealed about modernity.

Not only historians but also political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists were represented among these scholars: together, they developed an all-encompassing social scientific approach to GDR history. This again had its roots in the peculiar history of the discipline in France. Since the *Annales* school, history is one of the social sciences—not, as in the United States (and almost everywhere), a subfield of the humanities. This approach, which combines history, sociology, anthropology, and historical political science, has been very fruitful for understanding the GDR in a “*Systemimmanenz*” way, i.e., as a way in which to uncover its sociopolitical fabric and understand power relations in a socialist dictatorship. From a socio-historical perspective, French researchers favored early on a bottom-up perspective, as well as an approach to power that emphasizes the agency of ordinary actors.²⁰ They were not alone in this endeavor, of course, and all these historians have worked in close cooperation with the tenets of *Alltagsgeschichte*. Still, this approach is of one of the French historiography’s landmark contributions to the field.

Etoré-Lortholary (Paris: Gallimard, 2007). For the GDR, see Martin Sabrow, ed., *Erinnerungsorte der DDR* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2009).

¹⁹In particular, see Jean-Philippe Mathieu, Jean Mortier, and Gilbert Badia, *RDA: quelle Allemagne?* (Paris: Messidor—Ed. sociales, 1990); Jacques Poumet, *La Satire en RDA: cabarets et presse satirique* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1990). For a short survey, see Sandrine Kott, “Die DDR-Forschung in Frankreich,” *Deutschland Archiv* 6 (1997): 1029–31.

²⁰Sandrine Kott and Emmanuel Droit, eds., *Die ostdeutsche Gesellschaft. Eine transnationale Perspektive* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 2006), with contributions by more than a dozen French-speaking historians, sociologists, political scientists, and ethnographers.

To what extent, then, does this survey of the French historiography of modern Germany “decenter” or at least question the findings of the US historiography, reflected not least in the pages of *CEH*? In the first place, it is deeply embedded—even without consciously knowing it is—in the political relations, based on reconciliation and understanding, between the two countries. This has led to the creation of numerous binational research structures. Even if the exchange of knowledge between French historians of Germany and their German counterparts could be improved, such institutions have offered numerous spaces for fruitful and continuing dialogue. This dialogue has taken place in German, but, in the past, it also took place in French. This has led to a real hybridity in certain fields of history, for which there seems to be no equivalent in the United States. It is certainly true that historians of Germany in the United States—who are organized (e.g., in the German Studies Association) as a professional community, which is not the case in France—keep a greater distance from political agendas. It would nevertheless be interesting to investigate the type of scholarly relationships produced by the political, cultural, and linguistic imbalance between the victor of World War II, the United States, and an “Americanized” Germany. Moreover, the American political and social context, as well as the large community of German refugees, have no doubt left an imprint on the field of German history there.

Second, the French historiography has its own peculiarities in terms of the approaches it takes and the methodological debates that have arisen around them: To which extent are borderlands fruitful spaces for questioning rigid national narratives? Should the history of transfers supplant a more comparative approach, and if so, of which kind? Which actors can be regarded as “links” between both countries? The social science approach has been particularly fruitful for studying the GDR and has led to dialogue with US historians—a dialogue that should extend to other subfields of modern German history. This would require a greater mutual reception of the historiography on both sides of the Atlantic. *Central European History* could certainly play an important role in this regard, not least by serving as a conduit or go-between.

UNIVERSITY OF GENEVA