

Peter Schöttler, *Du Rhin à la Manche: Frontières et relations franco-allemandes au XXe siècle*

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JACOB COLLINS

## REFLECTIONS OF THE RHINE

More than a decade after the Great Recession, Europe is being stalked by phantoms of its pre-post-nationalist past. Border issues once thought to have been eliminated by political and economic integration are now a matter of daily politics in many European countries. States in Central Europe are building fences to keep out migrants, while Macron tightens French asylum law ‘to throw out everybody who has no reason to be here’. In this climate, Peter Schöttler’s historiographical treatment of the Rhine—one of Europe’s most symbolic frontier zones—comes as a timely intervention. Focusing on the river’s twentieth-century history, Schöttler wants to understand how borders have been made and remade, and how they have come to figure as part of a European imaginary.

The Rhine is not, as Schöttler notes, solely a Franco-German river. From its sources in the Swiss Alps, it flows mostly northward, forming a part of the Swiss-Austrian, Swiss-German, and lower Germano-French borders. From there it traverses the German Rhineland, passing through Mannheim, Mainz, Koblenz, Bonn, Cologne, Düsseldorf and Duisburg before cutting across the southern part of the Netherlands and emptying into the North Sea. The Rhine’s modern history, however, has been dominated by the national rivalries of France and Germany. East of the Rhine, the river has been seen as unquestionably German, part of its *Herzland*. French statesmen, on the other hand, considered control of the left bank to be of strategic value—a bridge into Central Europe and defensive corridor against Austria and Prussia. The Revolutionaries aimed to push France to its ‘natural borders’: the sea to the north and west, the mountains to the south, the Rhine to the east. Napoleon made this a reality in 1806. With his fall, the right

bank of the river fell under Prussian control in 1815. Half a century later, Bismarck extended the borders of the German nation-state into the French provinces of Alsace and Lorraine—a founding trauma for the fledgling Third Republic, though Schöttler attempts to moderate the impression of an unbridled revanchist nationalism. The 1919 Treaty of Versailles returned Alsace-Lorraine to France while the Rhineland Agreement provided for Allied occupation of the left bank for fifteen years, administered by a High Commission in Koblenz. In 1923, French Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré sent troops across the river into the Ruhr Valley, bringing German economic life to a standstill. At the same time, French representatives on the High Commission decided to recognize Rhenish separatists in the Palatinate as an independent government. The infuriated British sent orders for their own staff to abandon any support for this state, and as a result, the movement collapsed immediately. The last French troops vacated the Rhineland in 1930. Hitler remilitarized the region in 1936. After the Nazi Blitzkrieg of May–June 1940, a ‘Demarcation line’ ran north from the Pyrenees along the Atlantic Coast up to Tours, then cut west across the middle of France to Geneva: everything north and west of that line was under German occupation; south and east the domain of Pétain’s National Revolution.

What entry has this turbulent history made in the world of ideas? Soon after the First World War there appeared a specialist literature around the problem of whether the Rhine was the frontier of France or the main river in Germany. This included pamphlets, books, edited volumes, as well as publications by committees and organizations dedicated to researching the Rhine. These are the texts that occupy Schöttler in the first half of *Du Rhin à la Manche*, with the author positioning himself as an arbitrator between the two literatures.

He examines the French case first, turning to Lucien Febvre’s 1931 study, *Le Rhin*, a work commissioned by the Société Générale Alsacienne de Banque to commemorate its fiftieth anniversary. Though sketchy in places and evidently written in haste, *Le Rhin* was, for Schöttler, a work of the highest political and intellectual significance, in effect announcing an entirely new research programme. Febvre approached the Rhine not as a naturally given barrier, but as a product of human history, a construction. Human beings had adapted themselves to the river over the centuries, and in turn the river had been transformed through their actions. Thus, there could be no original or pure state of the Rhineland, as was claimed by proponents of the racial view of history. If one looked at the medieval and Renaissance life of the Rhine, as did Febvre’s book, one would see forming at the confluence of Roman, Christian and Germanic civilizations a zone of flourishing urban cultures. The river cut across empires and kingdoms, and its cities, from Basel to Dordrecht, came to acquire their own distinct culture—republican and cosmopolitan in spirit. The Rhine was truly a European river, and

retrospective attempts to make it solely Teutonic or French could only do so through patent distortion. In writing such a study, Febvre was, for Schöttler, fulfilling one of the programmatic ideals of the influential historical journal *Annales*, envisioned by Febvre and its co-founder Marc Bloch as an explicitly anti-nationalist enterprise. At his inaugural lecture at the University of Strasbourg in 1919, Febvre claimed to have no interest in becoming 'a bootless missionary of an official national gospel'. For this, it was necessary to 'unlearn from Germany'. Schöttler notes that German historians thought Febvre's book dangerous, not for opposing German nationalist ambitions, but for delegitimizing them.

Indeed, scholarship on the other side of the Rhine was markedly different, and Schöttler devotes two detailed chapters to Germany's institutes for *Westforschung* (Western research). The first of these to appear after the War was the *Institut für die geschichtliche Landeskunde der Rheinlande* (Institute for the Regional History of the Rhineland) in Bonn in 1920. Not unlike the *Annales* School, it aimed to break with the diplomatic and political history of nineteenth-century scholarship to create an interdisciplinary study of the region's people, taking in contributions from historians, linguists (especially those who specialized in German dialects), geographers, economists and historians of art. Schöttler points out a key ambiguity in the group's output. On the one hand, it was often reluctant to embrace a racial view of history. He notes in particular how Franz Steinbach, an historian and early director of the group, concluded his 1926 study of the Rhine by arguing that 'it is a grave error to deduce Frankish cultural and economic institutions from Germanic or Roman singularities. By mixing hydrogen and oxygen, a new entity is formed, water'. On the other hand, the texts were mired in nationalist themes, and Steinbach contradicted his own position by calling for more research on the Frankish colonization of Gaul, and recommending that the Rhine's left bank be re-Germanized.

The activity of such organizations were increasingly coordinated at regional level by the so-called *Volksdeutsche Forschungsgemeinschaften* (German National Research Groups), which were funded, often covertly, by the state in Berlin. The one dedicated to the Rhineland, the *Westdeutsche Forschungsgemeinschaften* (WFG), was established in 1931, two years before the advent of the Third Reich. By the middle of the decade, there were no illusions about the mission of these institutes: 'to deliver as many arguments and materials as possible for the complete redrawing of German borders'. The WFG was no exception, and was duly radicalized, the young historian Franz Petri (b. 1903) emerging as a leading figure. His two-volume dissertation, *Germanisches Volkserbe in Wallonien und Nordfrankreich* (*Germanic Folk Heritage in Wallonia and Northern France*) was published in Bonn in 1937, just after the remilitarization of the Rhineland. Its claims were more aggressive than Steinbach's, arguing, in Schöttler's words, for 'a

massive colonization by the Franks of Belgium and Northern France up to the Loire' on the basis of toponymic and archaeological evidence later shown to be spurious. The WFG also intensified its propaganda campaign during these years: it organized two dozen scholarly conferences, with accompanying field trips to the Rhenish sites; founded specialist journals to promote its scholarship (and discredit that of the French); and published an encyclopedia of German heritage at the western frontiers, involving some five hundred scholars. As Schöttler points out, the WFG was no small enclave of hardliners. By 1939 there were roughly one thousand German researchers working in *Westforschung* networks.

With the Nazi invasion and defeat of France in May–June 1940, 'western research' acquired a new urgency. Petri entered the German military administration and was charged with managing the Germanization of Belgium and Northern France. Meanwhile Wilhelm Stuckart, Reichsminister of the Interior, was commissioned to outline a revised plan for the western border. That document and all copies were assumed to have been destroyed or lost, until Schöttler discovered the original version in a Canadian library, with what he believes are probably the Führer's own red-pencil notations. The memo is published here in its entirety, underlinings included. One striking feature is the extent to which its recommendations are informed by *Westforschung*. Lands east of a line running from the mouth of the Somme river in Belgium southward through the Champagne region in France, and then down through Burgundy and the Franche-Comté to Geneva, were to be directly annexed into the Reich, their populations deported to make room for ethnic Germans. The document, in essence, is a case for the racial repopulation of the Rhineland based on historical and linguistic evidence. Stuckart was not a WFG figure, but the WFG's research proved indispensable to his plan. Petri's dissertation is cited in the text, and, if it was the Führer who annotated it, he evidently welcomed his theses, underscoring the following passage: 'In reality, the Germanic population of the High Middle Ages reached into the Northern and Eastern parts of France, that is, beyond the contemporary linguistic border, even extending as far as the Seine'. For Schöttler, the document raises questions about the relationship between knowledge and power, scholarship and politics. Were researchers in the WFG merely 'collaborators' with the Reich, or 'architects' of its western policies? According to Schöttler, Hitler was familiar with the *Westforschung* literature that filled the Stuckart memo, and had already intended, based on its arguments, to push the western border deeper into France. In this case, WFG scholarship 'provided pseudo-scientific legitimation—a kind of rational supplement to Hitler's policy'.

For a West German historian raised in the post-war years, questions of responsibility, guilt and collaboration carry great consequence, and it is to these issues that Schöttler turns in the second half of the book. He notes

how Petri, for instance, was able to enjoy a flourishing academic career after the War, taking over the Bonn Institute from Steinbach in 1961, and sees a similar process at work in the influential current of postwar historiography known as *Zeitgeschichte*, or 'contemporary history'. By the 1950s, institutes for *Zeitgeschichte* could be found at many of Germany's leading universities. Its chief practitioners were young, soon-to-be-eminent figures in the discipline, including Martin Broszat, Eberhart Jäckel and Hans Mommsen (Schöttler's MA supervisor). For Schöttler, however, there was little new about *Zeitgeschichte*. Under the same name, it had been deployed during the First World War to demonstrate that the Allies had forced Germany and Austria into the conflict against their will. After 1945 it was put to similar uses, to combat what these scholars called the 'Allied conception of history', and, in Schöttler's words, 'to rehabilitate a German national history'. Schöttler notes how *Zeitgeschichte* institutes were filled with ex-Nazis, and how the language of their texts drew heavily from the *völkisch* language of the interwar *Forschungsgemeinschaften*. Historically revisionist, *Zeitgeschichte* was also politically conformist, attempting to legitimize the controversial rearming of the *Bundeswehr* in West Germany in the 1950s.

The final chapter of *Du Rhin à la Manche* engages these issues from a personal angle, looking at Schöttler's own grandfather, Gustav Krukenberg, a member of the Waffen-ss. Krukenberg was a Rhinelander, born in Bonn in 1888. He became a career officer in the early 1910s, served on both fronts in the First World War, and fought with the *Freikorps* to repress the 1919 Spartacist insurrection. Multi-lingual and now with a doctorate in law, he entered the foreign service, and, in 1926, was chosen to be secretary of the 'Mayrisch Committee', an organization founded by the Luxembourgish industrial magnate Émile Mayrisch to promote 'Franco-German understanding'. Krukenberg served a five-year tenure in Paris—his opposite number in Berlin, Pierre Viénot—and concluded, upon his return to Germany, that the French were too self-obsessed to achieve real understanding, and that the Committee was wasting its time. In 1932, he joined the Nazi party. Under von Papen's government, he worked in the radio division of the Ministry of the Interior, and then, with Hitler's appointment as Chancellor, was promoted to *Reichskommissar* of the Radio. Within months, Goebbels became dissatisfied with his work and dismissed him in a fit of anger. Krukenberg nevertheless continued to serve the regime loyally, as a coordinator of provisions for the Wehrmacht in Poland, France, the Netherlands, Latvia and Byelorussia. He was transferred by his own request to the Waffen-ss in 1943, ending the war as commander of its notorious 'Charlemagne' division.

Thousands of French collaborators volunteered to fight in the elite Waffen-ss units. However, these were initially open only to recruits of Aryan stock, and applicants from Catholic countries were turned away. As Schöttler observes, Nazi war rhetoric shifted after Stalingrad: 'one was no

longer fighting just for a greater German Reich, but for *Festung Europa*, that is, Fortress Europe against Asia'. It was thus admissible that non-Aryans participate in this struggle. The aptly named Charlemagne division swore an oath of loyalty to Hitler in February 1945, and was sent off to fight the Red Army in Pomerania. The few who were not killed, captured or lost to desertion, made their last stand defending Hitler's bunker in the ruins of Berlin in April 1945.

Krukenberg was tried by a Soviet military tribunal, and handed a sentence of twenty-five years. He was released from his GDR prison in 1956, having meanwhile converted to Catholicism. A fifty-page memoir of his 'days of struggle' in the fall of Berlin was left unpublished, despite the urgings of his cousin Werner Conze. Although of advanced age and with a Nazi past, Krukenberg found a position in the *Stifterverband für die deutsche Wissenschaft*, a leading private foundation promoting German education and science. He refashioned himself as a loyalist of the centre-right CDU and toured the country lecturing to business groups and promoting Chancellor Adenauer's political vision for Europe: peace through an enduring Franco-German friendship, later sealed in the pact Adenauer signed with de Gaulle in 1963. Krukenberg's archives reveal a regular, if formal, correspondence with such figures as Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, apostle of European unity, and Hans Speidel, Rommel's number two and later commander of NATO land forces. Krukenberg was also a prominent figure in the German Veterans Association (VDH), covering Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS survivors alike, and was awarded its highest European medal, inscribed with the words *Europa ruft*—'Europe calls us'. In France, he was designated recipient of the Robert Schuman Prize for his service to European unity—previously awarded to Adenauer. Rumblings about his past from the French Veterans Association moved him to renounce the award, to avoid scandal, and it passed to Konstantin Karamanlis, architect of Greece's accession to the EU. Krukenberg died in 1980, as Schöttler reports, gripped by a fear of persecution.

For Schöttler, Krukenberg's eventful life was disquieting on many levels. He showed no attempt to reflect on the nature of the Third Reich or his own involvement with it. In fact, as Schöttler discovered, his grandfather continued to correspond with members of the Charlemagne division, many of whom had become active Holocaust deniers. Here too, little was mentioned of the War, and nothing of Nazi crimes. Schöttler wondered how this man was able to carry on in such a 'schizophrenic' fashion. That this could occur in postwar Germany was not so surprising to Schöttler: indeed, everything discussed in the book had so far suggested a failure of West German culture through the 1960s to grapple with the legacies of the Third Reich. More surprising was the light Krukenberg's biography potentially shed on the European project:

Specialists insist, with good reason, on the fact that Hitler and Goebbels did not know what to do with the European idea, sometimes disdaining it, sometimes using it in a tactical way. Certainly. But perhaps one should entertain the possibility that this negative attitude of Goebbels and Hitler—combined with the omnipresence of a European mythology in Nazi war propaganda, that of the *Waffen-SS* especially—allowed a nationalist of a more ‘realist’ frame of mind like Krukenberg to insert his anti-liberal idea of Europe into the discourse of the Cold War and the new politics of the Western European alliance.

This is the tantalizing sentence with which Schöttler ends the book. It is well known that many fascists and wartime collaborators were able, after the War, to take cover under the more anodyne language of ‘Europe’ and the ‘Occident’. Indeed, the most influential current of the postwar French extreme right rallied around ‘Occidentalism’ in the 1950s, defending the unity of white European civilization against neighbouring Slavic, Arabic and Turkic cultures. But just what Krukenberg’s astonishing trajectory—from the *Mayrisch* Committee to defence of Hitler’s bunker to the Robert Schuman Prize—might mean for a more general history of conceptions of European integration is never directly addressed by Schöttler, who limits himself to a dead-pan summary in the chapter title: ‘Three forms of collaboration: Europe and Franco-German reconciliation in the career of Gustav Krukenberg, commander of the Charlemagne division’.

Few scholars are as well suited to undertake a study like *Du Rhin à la Manche* as Schöttler, who has lived an unusually trans-Rhenish life. Born in North Rhine-Westphalia in 1950, he grew up across the border in Brussels, attended high school in Essen and studied at German and French universities. At age nineteen, he co-authored a highly critical book on Maoism in China. In 1974 he attended the Sixth Section of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, taking courses in philosophy with Louis Althusser, and in history with Michelle Perrot and Georges Haupt, both leading scholars of the late-nineteenth-century labour movement. A PhD at Bremen yielded *Die Entstehung der ‘Bourses du travail’* (1982), a study of the labour councils created by socialist leaders across France in the 1880s and 90s. Its Althusserian inflection is indicated by the subtitle of the French translation: ‘Un appareil idéologique d’État à la fin du XIXe siècle’. Instead of seeing the Bourses as a straightforward expression of worker empowerment, Schöttler situated them within a history of state-led efforts to control and regulate the workers’ movement.

In the 1970s, Schöttler edited and translated into German major texts by Althusser and his students. This work was to continue from the mid-1980s onward, but in new forms, for Schöttler turned away from Marxism and Marxist-inspired social history and began writing essays in a different historiographical and intellectual-historical mode. There were texts, for instance,

reflecting on the 'discursive turn' in historical writing, and the role played by German historians during the Third Reich. Schöttler's most significant work from this period, however, focused on thinkers associated with the *Annales* School. In his typically forensic manner, Schöttler has uncovered new *Annales* texts and shed light on neglected figures within its orbit, notably Lucie Varga, the Austro-Jewish historian who fled to France, became Febvre's secretary, and contributed the journal's main essays on National Socialism. His work is a reminder that a new history of *Annales* needs to be written, one that takes into account not only these newly discovered texts and figures, but also the journal's political activities, and its commitment to environmental history. Mike Davis has already begun to do this in the pages of this journal.

With the wide-ranging essays of *Du Rhin à la Manche*, Schöttler has produced a fascinating and unusual take on the history and historiography of the period, one full of interesting comparisons, politically ambiguous characters and bracing counterfactuals. There is, however, an obvious imbalance in his handling of the Franco-German historiographic axis of the book: the German figures typically appear as conformist and servile in comparison to their more independent-minded French counterparts. This leads to misrepresentation in both directions. Schöttler's attack on postwar *Zeitgeschichte* as an apologetic conformism is far too broad-brush, and is contradicted by the work of historians like Mommsen and Broszat. There is also the fact that postwar German historiography was far quicker to deal with the record of Nazism than postwar French historiography was with the record of Vichy. Whereas Broszat was publishing path-breaking work on the Nazi period as early as the 1960s, it was not until after Paxton published *Vichy France* in 1972—which met with vitriolic rejection in France—that, still very gradually, French historians started coming to terms with the record of the Pétain regime and the extent of social support for it in the French population.

Conversely, Schöttler's representation of Febvre and Bloch as historians who, by contrast with their opposite numbers in interwar Germany, were unaffected by nationalist blinkers is too uncritical. Neither of the *Annales* historians ever questioned the notion, reflected in the absurd 'war guilt' clauses of Versailles and the open-ended punitive reparations imposed on Germany, at—above all—French insistence, that the First World War was a battle by France for 'truth and justice'. As personally humane and intellectually cosmopolitan as Febvre and Bloch were, they had no more qualms about the inter-imperialist slaughter of 1914–18 than their counterparts in Germany. Moreover, the *Annales* record of support for French colonialism is never mentioned by Schöttler. This was no small part of the journal's output, with fifteen per cent of its articles from 1929 to 1933 devoted to African history. The tone was set early on by Febvre himself, who in a 1930 review marvelled at the transformative work being done by French settlers in Algeria, and who celebrated their victory in the 1840s over Abd al-Qadir's



insurgency. The journal likewise praised and supported the work of scholars involved in the French colonial mission. Even after the War, Fernand Braudel, successor to Febvre at *Annales*, lamented Spain's failure to make more of its colonial birthright in North Africa.

It is also to be regretted that Schöttler did not write a fuller portrait of Krukenberg, based on his access to what seem to be Krukenberg's quite extensive personal papers, and—given that Schöttler knew him well into his own adult years—his memories of him, which presumably could have given us more (historical-)psychological insight into his character. Moreover, parts of the Krukenberg story seem to invite deeper investigation, especially Mayrisch and the Committee he helped found. As well as top industrialists and politicians from both countries, the organization also included leading intellectuals: Ernst Robert Curtius and Hermann Oncken, both distinguished German historians; Egyptologist Jürgen von Beckerath; Pierre Janet, Freud's French rival; Jean Schlumberger, the French writer and co-founder of *Nouvelle revue française*; André Siegfried, the pioneering French political scientist; Albert Thibaudet, the preeminent literary critic of Third Republic France; and many others. Mayrisch himself was the architect of a cross-border steel cartel foreshadowing the European Coal and Steel Community that was the original core of the Schuman Plan after the War. Was the cultural-intellectual side of the Committee just window-dressing, or did it perhaps correspond to the concerns of Mayrisch's wife, then widow, Aline, who supported exiled writers during the Third Reich, and financed Thomas Mann's journal for émigrés? Schöttler's reticence here is odd given the extent to which Krukenberg's role on the Committee seems to have been his key credential as a herald of Franco-German reconciliation after 1956.

At a deeper level, the concepts of *Du Rhin à la Manche* are not always fully formed, beginning with that of 'Europe' itself. The title of the book, perhaps imposed by the publisher, is somewhat misleading, since the Channel features only once, in Stuckart's plan of 1940, which was never pursued by Berlin. It is the Rhine that unites its chapters. Schöttler holds out Febvre's *Le Rhin* as a properly European approach to the study of the river, one that acknowledges the porosity and artificiality of frontiers, while also constituting the Rhine as a zone of cross-cultural exchange. We might therefore have expected Schöttler to give similar treatment to this 'natural' border in the twentieth century, but in fact the book engages the Rhine primarily through a national frame. It is a history of German nationalists in Germany against (more moderate) French nationalists in France. The Rhenish separatists, an autochthonous creation of the region, rate scarcely a mention in the book. Indeed, Krukenberg emerges as the one truly Rhenish figure, active on both sides of the river, much like Marx and Engels a century before, if politically their radical opposite. 'Europe' is also missing as a political entity: one would never know from this book that the Rhine is now the *Herzland* of Europe,

many a key institution of today's EU—its Parliament in Strasbourg, its Court of Justice in Luxembourg—situated on or close to the river. We therefore have little sense of how the postwar construction of 'Europe' affected the national tensions Schöttler diagrams in the first half of the book. Has the Union created a European culture along the river, or has it merely provided a framework for offsetting Franco-German tensions without dissolving nationalist borders and mentalities?

There is a related absence of any reflection on the role of capital in shaping the twentieth-century history of the river, and this places the contemporary Rhine somewhat beyond the book's reach. This is an opportunity foregone rather than a failure, since Schöttler's political strategy is consistently oblique and reserved. In recent decades, parts of the Rhine region have been a rustbelt, known more for unemployment and industrial decline than cultural vibrancy. Economically, this is beginning to change, as the Chinese state has chosen Duisburg to serve as the western terminus of its trans-continental Belt and Road Initiative. It is the largest inland port in Europe and one of its biggest transport and logistics hubs. Every day containers arriving by train from Chongqing and Wuhan can be seen being loaded onto trucks and ships and transported to Italy, Switzerland and France. There are more than a hundred Chinese companies active in the city, and Chinese restaurants now line the river's banks.

What will this mean for the fading culture of the Rhineland? In an imaginative reworking of the philosophical biography of Marx and Engels—as Rhinelanders whose vision of the world was utterly premature, but is finally coming into its own today—Tom Nairn remarked that 'since the 1980s, the whole world has become more like the old Rhineland. Globalization means many different things, but among them is the conversion of the world into an unavoidable, forced terrain of confluence, a cross-fertilization from which escape is impossible'. Has the Rhine thus been fated to relive its own history? As these new sources of investment pour in—no checkpoints or borders—what will this cross-fertilization look like? Will it reactivate old atavisms in the heartland of Europe? More likely it will continue to enrich the European core at the expense of the periphery, capital flowing seamlessly through the north while migrants stream in from the south, facing shipwreck, detention and xenophobic violence. What Schöttler misses in his story is how shifting economic imperatives have shaped and reconstructed European border regimes across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The Rhine is no longer the borderland it once was, but the cultural-political axis of a Europe that pushes violence and exploitation toward the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.