

Anne Couderc, Corine Defrance, Ulrich Pfeil (dir.), *La réconciliation/Versöhnung. Histoire d'un concept entre oubli et mémoire/Geschichte eines Begriffs zwischen Vergessen und Erinnern*, Frankfurt a. M. (Peter Lang Edition) 2022, 358 p., 17 ill. (L'Allemagne dans les relations internationales/Deutschland in den internationalen Beziehungen, 18), ISBN 978-2-87574-489-0, EUR 37,45.

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par
Jasper Heinzen, York

Intuitively it seems that the notion of reconciliation is never far when societies debate conflict. Without such an exit strategy, what is to stop violence from becoming permanent or escalating to a state of total enmity? The convergence of a number of issues in recent years, which range from the polarization of politics to the effects of Covid-19, climate change, terrorism, the war in Ukraine, the situation in Palestine, and the unresolved legacies of European imperialism, has injected new urgency into this question. German academics are taking to the challenge with alacrity, as demonstrated by Bonn University Press' decision to create a book series dedicated to interdisciplinary reconciliation studies. The inaugural volume, an edited collection of essays published under the stewardship of Esther Gardei, Michael Schulz, and Hans-Georg Soeffner in 2023, led the way with theoretical reflections on the language of reconciliation in different historical contexts.¹

The Bonn project is the natural companion piece to a Franco-German collection of essays from the year before, which forms the main focus of the present review. The complementarity of the two publications is mentioned because they can be fruitfully read alongside each other. Both are attentive to the exceedingly complex semantic valences of reconciliation and show how important it is to study concrete proposals for peace in transnational perspective. Yet the subtitles also underscore differences of approach. Whereas Gardei et al. foreground the »theory and practice« of reconciliation globally from Antiquity to the present, Anne Couderc and her co-editors problematize the presence of reconciliation in Western conflict resolution strategies since the Treaties of Westphalia (1648).

La réconciliation is the more attractive volume because the themes of the 16 French and German contributions add up to a convincing *Gesamtkunstwerk*, whose main features Corine Defrance sums up in a well-crafted coda. Collectively, they pinpoint momentous shifts



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

¹ Esther Gardei, Michael Schulz, Hans-Georg Soeffner (ed.), *Versöhnung: Theorie und Empirie*, Göttingen 2023.

in thinking around reconciliation in Western European political and legal discourse in the last 370 years. The term first appeared in peace treaties to affirm the restoration of amicable relations, which committed both parties to wipe the slate clean, yet without suppressing the painful memories of war to remind everyone of the stakes. With the ascendancy of mass nationalism retribution replaced concerns for reconciliation in the second half of the nineteenth century, even as humanitarian efforts to ameliorate the frequency and conduct of war planted visions of a better future. The fraught path of international relations in the lead-up to the two world wars increasingly pitted liberal reform agendas against anti-democratic interpretations of reconciliation. Several chapters trace the former through case studies of Freemasonry, Rudolf Breda's pacifist journal *Die Versöhnung* (1917/1919), the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's ultimately unsuccessful attempt after the First World War to open up an academic dialogue between the former belligerents on the causes of the conflict, and the League of Nations' investment in educational initiatives aimed at »moral disarmament«. Coming at reconciliation from another ideological direction, Sebastian Liebold and Dominik Rigoll show in their respective chapters how conservative nationalists played on shared ideological interests to encourage French support for and, after 1940, collaboration with the Nazi regime.

Appropriately, the last section of the volume closes with an examination of the discursive »reset« at the end of the Second World War. The destruction instigated by the Third Reich but reciprocated to a degree with the Allied bombing of German cities left in its wake intense negative emotions of hatred and guilt that could not be resolved through the tried method of *tabula rasa*. Instead, reconciliation built on the remembrance of trauma to enable forgiveness as the product of a continuous, gradual process of healing. Anne Raulin's chapter on long-term continuities highlights the extent to which the mnemonic conventions adopted in response to the aerial bombardment of Coventry and Dresden still resonate in post-9/11 America.

The volume has many admirable qualities. Among them is the recognition that speech acts paint an incomplete picture of reconciliation. The segments by Urszula Pełkala, Marie-Alexandra Schneider and Anne Raulin which defend the idea that strategic silences, images created for propaganda, and sites of memory made survivors of the Second World War receptive to a rapprochement where words proved inadequate. A further strength is the essay collection's attention to the seminal role of religious motives in European debates about forgiveness. The transcendence of confessional divisions to contain the threat of an Ottoman »Other« became a long-standing objective of diplomacy, which could be adapted without too much difficulty to the changed political landscape of the Cold War to invoke the unity of a Christian Occident in opposition to the Soviet Union. Tellingly, Adenauer and de Gaulle chose the cathedral of Reims for one of the first public displays of Franco-German friendship in July 1962. In an especially insightful intervention Florian Michel analyses



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

the Papacy's emergence as a major sponsor of reconciliation at the height of the Cold War. This example of papal agency touches on a final area where *La réconciliation* excels. All the chapters underscore the multitude of stakeholders in peace-building, be they intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), national governments, churches, civic bodies, or even private individuals with no official mandate.

Needless to say, editorial choices always exact a price. While the contributions make for a cohesive volume thanks to the complementary subject matter, their intellectual and geographical remit is squarely Eurocentric and – with 4 out of the 14 case studies – predominantly Franco-German. Europe's export of her great-power antagonisms and distinctive modes of warfare to other parts of the globe remains unaddressed. Moreover, a more systematic typology of conflict would have sharpened the volume's explanations for the success or failure of certain reconciliation strategies. Rather ill-defined assumptions about war prevail. Leaving aside the issue that violence comes in many different forms, not all of which lead to war but can be just as impactful, it would have been helpful to hear more about the different challenges which cabinet wars, people's wars, civil wars, wars of religion, ideological warfare, and, indeed, terrorism manifest.

Notwithstanding these caveats, the editors are to be congratulated on having assembled an interdisciplinary team of authors that not only illuminate reconciliation in international relations from a variety of angles but collectively speak to patterns which other scholarship can build on. Given Europe's slate of historical and ever-expanding new conflicts, that is no mean achievement.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)