

**Christoph Brüll, Christian Henrich-Franke, Claudia Hiepel, Guido Thiemeyer (Hg.), Belgisch-deutsche Kontakträume in Rheinland und Westfalen, 1945–1995, Baden-Baden (Nomos) 2020, 221 S., zahlr. Abb., (Historische Dimensionen Europäischer Integration, 31), ISBN 978-3-8487-6566-9, EUR 44,00.**

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Despite a common history dating back to the Holy Roman Empire, surprisingly few German researchers try to dig deeper into the complex Belgian history. Furthermore, most of the existing research focuses on the German occupations during the First and Second World War. Even though Belgium was among the first countries to restart diplomatic relations with the Federal Republic of Germany in 1951, and already concluded a German-Belgian border treaty in 1956, very little research has been done on the relations between the two countries in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The collective volume, »Belgisch-deutsche Kontakträume in Rheinland und Westfalen, 1945–1995« aims at closing this gap. It is the result of a fruitful collaboration among researchers with a specific expertise in the field of German-Belgian relations, like Christoph Brüll, and others with a focus on European integration, like Claudia Hiepel, Guido Thiemeyer, and Christian Henrich-Franke. The military aspects of the relationship between the two countries take once more center stage as the contributions focus on the military presence of Belgium in Germany after the Second World War.

Looking beyond the victorious powers, the book sheds light on the less well-known chapter of the Belgian military occupation and presence throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not only were 75 000 Belgian soldiers in Germany in May 1945, the Belgian Forces in Germany – Forces belges en Allemagne (FBA)/ Belgische strijdkrachten in Duitsland (BSD) – were also part of the standoff between NATO's forces guarding Western Europe and the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War. With their presence, however, these soldiers created spaces of encounter between Belgians and Germans (»belgisch-deutsche Kontakträume«), which is the topic of the book.

As the chapters of Claudia Hiepel, Marc Laplasse and Christian Henrich-Franke show, the character of this encounter changed from an occupation, with all its tensions, to coexistence and cooperation. Each article focuses on a different Belgian garrison as they discuss the meaning of the narrative of a »transition from occupier to friend« at the local level. By doing so, they manage to show that this image, which has been used frequently to describe



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the development of the presence of British, French, American, and Belgian forces in Germany, remained partly an abstract concept in towns like Soest, Lüdenscheid or Siegen.

Whereas there was certainly a transition from an occupying force to a political and military ally, things are a bit more complex when it comes to friendship, apart from exceptions like Burkhard Schnettler – the founder of a museum on the FBA/BSD in Soest. Considering that the situation began with a general order against fraternization and with evictions to free housing space, which was already scarce, for Belgian officers and their families, there was soon a dramatic shift. This included marriages between Belgian soldiers and German women starting as early as 1951. However, as Hiepel, Laplasse and Henrich-Franke show, despite all efforts, be it open days, parades or cultural events, the military logic of the Belgian presence naturally imposed limits on a Belgian-German rapprochement in the towns concerned. For Laplasse, it is thus more accurate to divide the years of a Belgian military presence into phases when the actors stood against each other (1946–1955), next to each other (1955–1970) and with each other (1970–2020). Looking at the rather striking similarities between Soest, Lüdenscheid and Siegen, one would wish for an actual comparison. Brüll partially takes this up in his introduction, but a separate conclusion after those three articles could have been a fruitful addition.

Pierre Muller's contribution about Belgian tanks in the public perception confirms a rather uneventful coexistence as Belgian soldiers, contrary to the American and British forces, faced almost no antimilitarist opposition. A close cooperation between the FBA/BSD and the German authorities played here an important role. As Jonas Krüning points out in one of the strongest contributions to the collective volume, it was this cooperative approach pursued by Belgian army officers which helped to solve the conflict concerning the use of a military training area as a local recreation area – despite efforts of local politicians to escalate matters. Another point is the less prominent position of the Belgian forces, which never had the same power and prominence as the four occupation forces. This aspect is the focus of Vitus Sproten's contribution which deals with media and pop culture. Whereas American and British forces, with their broadcasting services, had a real impact in the realm of German civil society, promoting jazz or beat music, Belgian attempts to promote its own culture were rather limited. Concerts of artists like the jazz musician Toots Thielemans were organised for Belgian soldiers as the focus of the Belgian army was predominantly to keep its members in the sphere of influence of their home country and not to promote a Belgian way of life in Germany.

Several contributions highlight the difference between Dutch and French speaking garrisons and battalions, and also the difficulty in defining a Belgian way of life. Besides the logic of a military presence, Henrich-Franke identifies language as one of the main reasons for continued distance between Belgians and Germans.

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As he highlights, in the early 1970s the participation and interest in festivities and open days drops dramatically, and even the coverage of the local press adopts a rather distanced approach after francophone soldiers took over the garrison in Siegen. This went hand in hand, as Sproten points out, with a dramatic change in intercultural communication. As a result of the regionalisation, culture became a regional competence in Belgium.

Sproten's useful reference to developments in Belgium itself is an exception in a book which remains overwhelmingly close to its subject. The rather descriptive character of most contributions is hence one of two main points of criticism. Besides Sproten, who locates his article in a wider context of research on pop culture as well as transfer of culture, most contributions skip a contextualization or a comparative approach, as highlighted before. This might be due to the nature of the collective volume as a publication that resulted from a conference in April 2018 about »Belgians in Germany« taking place in the former military training area of Vogelsang. However, and this is the second point of criticism, there are hardly any references to concepts of space and spatial history in a publication which, according to its title, deals with spaces of encounter. This is almost as surprising as its sole focus on the Belgian military presence in Germany. For all those who are interested in this particular subject, however, this publication provides an excellent overview of the work that has been done and highlights some interesting paths for further research. Finally, still looking at Belgium mainly from a German perspective, it is another valuable contribution to a slowly growing field of research on Belgian history and the complex relations between the two neighbouring countries.



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