



Andrew S. Tompkins. *Better Active than Radioactive!: Anti-Nuclear Protest in 1970s France and West Germany.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. XV, 265 S. \$99.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-182620-7.

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Reviewing this book for H-German is a bit of a curious endeavor, given that Andrew Tompkins's *Better Active than Radioactive!* does not constitute a German national history in the strict sense of the word. In fact, the book, based on his Oxford dissertation, is written as a truly transnational, entangled history of "anti-nuclear protest in 1970s France and West Germany," as the subtitle aptly clarifies. Both in terms of the analysis and the narrative, Tompkins presents a story involving French and German actors observing and learning from each other, routinely interacting and cooperating across the national divide. At the same time, activists rhetorically invoked international and European solidarity. They thought of themselves as a border-crossing international of righteous fighters against the evils of the nuclear establishment (which by the way was also in many ways transnational). Transnational exchange also included misunderstandings and conflicts, with at times grave consequences.

Clearly, links between French and West German antinuclear protesters along the Rhine during the heyday of protest against the planned expansion of nuclear power in the 1970s have already featured in the literature on antinuclear and environmental protest in Germany, France, and Europe. Most recently, Stephen Milder examined transnational protest along the upper Rhine.

[1] However, Milder's analytical focus was primarily on the impact of such transnational exchange on the German antinuclear movement, the rise of the German Green Party, and democracy in Germany. By contrast, Tompkins's radically transnational approach to the social history of antinuclear protest in the 1970s offers a new perspective, beyond methodological nationalism. He boldly claims that the antinuclear movement was in fact a single, transnational movement "that crossed national, political, cultural and social boundaries" (p. 3).

In order to analyze such an "informal" and "decentralized" social movement (p. 2), Tompkins relies on an impressively broad source base. This allows him to explore the movement in great depth, and from a bottom-up perspective, combining contemporary records with the recollections of numerous participants, using oral history methods. Tompkins evaluated sources from thirty-two state and nonstate archives, fourteen private collections, the activist press, and audio-visual materials, and conducted sixty-eight interviews on both sides of the border, in French and German.

Tompkins's account is divided into six chapters. The first, introductory chapter presents his rather general research questions—notably, why nuclear power became the object of such strong

opposition, leading to alliances of very diverse actors who nevertheless cooperated quite effectively, and why these movements in France and Germany resembled each other so strongly. Tompkins is less interested in the puzzle that is often central in current debates, namely, why the movements differed with a view to their success in stopping nuclear power. This puzzle is slightly anachronistic given that not only French but also German political elites remained committed to nuclear power well into the 1990s.

In the first chapter, Tompkins presents his “transnational social history” (p. 8) approach and situates it within the relevant literatures on entangled and transnational history. The introduction also provides a helpful overview of antinuclear protest events in France and Germany between 1971 (Fessenheim, Alsace) and 1981 (Brokdorf, Schleswig-Holstein), as well as estimates of the number of participants and a useful map of the different protest sites across rural France and Germany. In a brief manner, Tompkins presents the state of the art on protest, including the controversial issue of the link between 1968 and the antinuclear movement. Tompkins also discusses the contemporary social science concept of “new social movements,” which included the antinuclear movement, along with other movements supposedly focusing on “post-materialist” issues such as feminism, ecology, or gay rights. While Tompkins rejects the claim that the antinuclear movement pursued postmaterialist aims, he argues that the concept remains useful because it makes us aware of the entanglements and overlapping values, ideologies, and actors across protest movements. Tompkins also situates his account in the growing literature on antinuclear protest in environmental history, given that this protest was intricately entangled with the rise of ecology and environmentalism in the 1970s.

Chapter 2 discusses the emergence of antinuclear protest in a process of “antinuclear fusion,”

in which different protest traditions—ideological, political, but also practical—and often material interests converged. Among the material interests, health concerns featured prominently, but also the unequal distribution of risks and benefits. Local risks were concentrated, while business, industry, and the bureaucrats themselves living in urban areas or the state capitals stood to benefit. This in turn triggered regionalist resistance—Baden vs. Württemberg in Germany, or Alsace vs. Paris in France. At the local level, villages next to the ones where the power plant was to be located, such as Weisweil near Wyhl, were central to the protest because they were not to have a say in the decision and would not benefit from tax income, but would nevertheless have to bear the risks. The policy of governments and utilities to place nuclear power plants near national borders, supposedly in order to “divide and rule” (p. 35), backfired in the long run because it triggered transnational networks of border sites. Protest traditions and regional languages (such as the Alemannic dialect) were invoked, serving as a means of cross-border communication and a symbol of cross-border commonalities. Tompkins provides an excellent analysis of the contribution to the protest by “outsiders”—ranging from Christians and back-to-the country communes to left-wing radicals and Maoists, who perceived rural antinuclear protest as a suitable terrain in which to try out Chairman Mao’s ideas—and the problems of integrating them into protest coalitions.

Chapter 3, “Radioactivity Does Not Stop at the Border—and Neither Do We,” traces the build-up of transnational networks connecting different protest regions in France and Germany—Bretagne, Rhone-Alpes, Alsace-Baden, and Northern Germany—as well as activists in the United States such as at Seabrook or Harrisburg, and in Japan. Thus, such transnational networks were not necessarily limited to the more routine exchange in border regions, such as the upper Rhine. Tompkins highlights the struggle of the French Larzac farmers against the extension of a military base

that provided an important model for the Gorbelen protesters. As transnational history has previously emphasized, transnational protest relied on border-crossers, whose role Tompkins examines.[2] He concludes that even if a lot of the “unity across borders” was “more imagined than real” and often “symbolic,” protesters did learn from each other, despite problems of translation or misunderstandings (p. 111).

Chapter 4, “Power to the Bauer” examines the implications of the rural nature of many reactor sites. While protest involved rural populations with very little practical protest experience, activists could bank on regionalist traditions and identities that were on the rise in Europe in the 1970s.[3] At the same time, romanticizing rural protest became an important motivating force for both left-wingers in support of the “revolutionary peasants,” but also in a more self-assured manner for rural populations themselves. Tompkins also analyzes the difficulties in overcoming the urban-rural divide.

The issue of violence, which had loomed large in contemporary media reporting on antinuclear protest, is at the heart of chapter 5, “‘Peaceful but Offensive’ Protest.” Curiously, antinuclear protest was in many ways an heir to the longer tradition of the nonviolent peace movement. With site occupations, however, the movement started to bend the boundaries of what was legal. Some of the left-wing groups were willing to use force at demonstrations or by committing acts of sabotage, if only in response to the violent suppression of peaceful protest by the police, increasingly armed with riot gear, water guns, helicopters, and tear gas. Tompkins traces the debate and dynamics of events and concludes that protesters alternated between nonviolent and violent protest. He rejects the contemporary critique that the West German antinuclear movement was descending into terrorism.

In chapter 6, Tompkins traces the impact of the transnational antinuclear movement at differ-

ent levels. At a political level, the German movement seems to have been more successful than the French one, given the energy transition away from nuclear power and a strong German Green Party. However, Tompkins highlights the more subtle impacts of the antinuclear movement in changing society. The movement provided a breeding ground particularly for political activism at the regional and local levels, in both France and Germany, and encouraged the development of alternative energies. Finally, based on the numerous oral histories conducted, Tompkins shows the impact of the movement on a more personal level, including its role in changing attitudes, behaviors, and friendships, and in some cases forming transnational couples. He equally highlights the price some people paid in terms of blocked careers or pension rights they were unable to acquire.

Tompkins concludes the book by highlighting the benefits of his transnational approach, which brings into view not only parallel but also interlinked developments in the opposition to nuclear energy as well as grassroots politics. In fact, distinctions between rural and urban protesters as well as between violent and nonviolent groups often proved much more important.

All in all, Tompkins lives up to his bold claims and provides a thoughtful, impressively detailed transnational history of a movement that was clearly more closely interlinked than previous national narratives have suggested. Among the strengths of Tompkins’s account are the depth and bottom-up coverage and analysis of the grassroots engagement of the individuals involved in the protest across borders. This clearly corroborates his claim of doing a social history. Tompkins makes the most out of the treasure trove of oral histories he assembled—invaluable sources collected just before age and death would make such an approach impossible. At the same time, the book is conceptually strong and makes an important contribution to the academic debate on anti-

nuclear protest and to the history of protest more generally.

Notes

[1]. Stephen Milder, *Greening Democracy: The Anti-Nuclear Movement and Political Environmentalism in West Germany and Beyond, 1968–1983* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[2]. Astrid Mignon Kirchhof and Jan-Henrik Meyer, “Global Protest against Nuclear Power. Transfer and Transnational Exchange in the 1970s and 1980s,” *Historical Social Research* 39, no. 1 (2014): 165-90.

[3]. Jan-Henrik Meyer, “Nature: From Protecting Regional Landscapes to Regionalist Self-Assertion in the Age of the Global Environment,” in *Regionalism and Modern Europe: Regional Identity Construction and Regional Movements from 1890 until the Present*, ed. Xosé M. Núñez Seixas and Eric Storm (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 65-82.

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