



**Manuel Borutta, Jan C. Jansen, eds..** *Vertriebene and Pieds-Noirs in Postwar Germany and France: Comparative Perspectives*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. xv + 300 pp. \$100.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-137-50840-9.

**Reviewed by** Gaëlle Fisher

**Published on** H-Nationalism (February, 2018)

**Commissioned by** Cristian Cercel (Ruhr University Bochum)

Scientists often emphasize the value of comparison: it provides a sharper lens—both a sense for what is more widely applicable and a deeper understanding of the specific cases at hand. And yet, particularly in the field of history, comparison proves difficult to conceptualize and carry out. Historians like to highlight the specific conditions of their particular case, stress the uniqueness of the circumstances. Comparing implies identifying common ground and requires, at least to an extent, an openness to generalization. It therefore also brings with it the risk of simplification or equalization and can be a source of unease. This is especially true when dealing with issues pertaining to the nation, let alone experiences of violence or suffering, which are prone to virulent contest and identitarian mobilization.

With this in mind, the initiative to compare the case of German expellees (*Vertriebene*) from Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War with that of French repatriates from North Africa (known as *rapatriés* or *Pieds-Noirs*) in the midst of decolonization is both innovative and bold. This idea, carried by two scholars, Manuel Borutta and Jan C. Jansen, first resulted in a conference, held in the German Historical Institute in Paris in 2012. As the authors explain, this event brought together for the first time

members of two different “academic communities” (p. vii). The present edited collection thus makes the outcomes of the dialogue and discussions started then available to a wider audience.

In the introduction to volume, Borutta and Jansen outline the exact terms of the comparison. As they themselves acknowledge, the circumstances of these two “reverse migrations” (p. 2) were very different: the scale and character of the violence (World War II and its twelve million expellees versus one million repatriates to France at the end of the Algerian War in particular), the nature of the groups and their modes of identification (ethnic Germans and German citizens of pre-1937 Germany versus colonial European settlers), and the situation and attitude of the receiving societies at the time of the migration (Germany in 1945 and France in 1962). However, they also usefully draw attention to the similarities between the two cases. Both these migrations resulted from “failed imperial projects and mass violence” (p. 1). The authors also stress the shared context for the events: the postwar era and its defining features (economic growth and the welfare state, the Cold War and increasing globalization). Finally, they sketch out the microlevel commonalities that have often been ignored by researchers in either field who dismissed the com-

parison outright: the perception of these migrants as “internal others” and their ambivalent relationship to other types of migrants and migrations, the shared challenges of developing integration policies and legal statuses in France and Germany, and similar issues and debates surrounding semantics, politics, and memory. The following twelve chapters, organized thematically in six sections, explore these macro- and microlevel issues in more depth and detail, and with reference to one of the cases. Indeed, each section is composed of two chapters, one on Germany and one on France.

In the first section, entitled “From Empire to Nation-State: 1945 and 1962,” Shelley Baranowski and Todd Shepard both seek to set the respective reverse migrations against the backdrop of a changing geopolitical landscape and mental map of France, Germany, Europe, and the world. Baranowski situates the case of expellees within a sweeping overview of modern German history. She argues that this movement of people contributed to the ethnocentric character of conceptions and definitions of citizenship, ethnicity, and belonging in the postwar German societies. Shepard shows how France’s self-understanding gradually changed from that of a supranational state to that of a nation-state in the period between 1945 and 1962. This helps explain how *l’Hexagone*, a metaphor for metropolitan France, could become a synonym for the country as a whole and why the country has struggled, since then, with both its overseas history and its supranational role within Europe.

The second section, on the circumstances of repatriation and integration, combines a conceptual paper by Michael Schwartz comparing “expellee integration” policies in East and West Germany and a piece by Yann Scioldo-Zürcher on the French social state policy toward the repatriates from North Africa in the 1960s. Schwartz shows that despite different approaches and turning points, both German states pursued integration

policies forcefully and ultimately displayed assimilationist tendencies. In France, too, the migrants’ belonging was taken for granted, but the policies were largely reactive. Scioldo-Zürcher points not only to the scale of the state’s intervention to respond to the repatriates’ social needs but also to the complexity and chaos of repatriation policy.

The third section brings together two strong contributions, the first by Pertti Ahonen and the second by Claire Eldridge on the newcomers’ modes of self-organization and representation. They raise the question of these groups’ unity and the legitimacy of those claiming to represent them. Ahonen emphasizes the heterogeneity of expellees as a group, questions the expellee leaders’ and organizations’ representativeness, and calls for us to examine more closely the motives for membership. Similarly, Claire Eldridge argues that for *pied-noir* organizations in France, “the external appearance of unity was paramount” (p. 133). However, as she convincingly shows, although these groups were networked, they were also highly diverse and divided, especially at the top. Both mention the role of language for creating the illusion of homogeneity and consensus.

The fourth section deals with the political impact and participation of these groups and seeks to challenge preconceptions surrounding the political alignment and electoral behavior of both Vertriebene and Pieds-Noirs. Frank Bösch, takes on the assumption of conservatism (especially CDU/CSU alignment) among expellees and that of their “successful integration.” For this, he looks at their negotiation with major parties and the role of the short-lived expellee party (BHE) founded in the early 1950s, and seeks to rehabilitate the contribution of the SPD to integration at the local and regional level. Eric Savarese then looks at the process of politicization of Pieds-Noirs after their arrival in metropolitan France. According to him, French political life was “partially reconfigured” (p. 174) by the repatriates’ arrival. However, he argues that the conjecture of a widespread far-

right (Front national) vote among Pieds-Noirs is difficult to prove and even doubtful if one takes into account social, religious, and cultural factors, too.

The fifth section looks into commemorative practices and emotions, or what Tobias Weger calls the migrants' "symbolic communication" (p. 193). Weger outlines the different forms of expellee activities and points to the continuities between the interwar period and the practices and discourses of expellees in postwar West Germany. However, he also highlights the diverse functions of these activities for the migrants' social and personal lives. For France, Michèle Baussant seeks to challenge the cliché of an identifiable Pied-Noir stance and points instead to the myriad of positions adopted (p. 212). In particular, she emphasizes the (Catholic) religious framework of many of the practices such as pilgrimages and the significance of Algeria not simply as an object of (politically charged) nostalgia but as a "human social space" (p. 226).

The last section focuses on contemporary politics of remembrance. Discussing the German case, Stefan Troebst draws attention to the global change of paradigm with regard to forced migrations in the last few decades. The fact that the case of expellees remains politically and internationally contentious, however, is reflected in the difficulties surrounding the institutionalization of the memorialization of these events in Germany and beyond. Jan C. Jansen situates the case of Pieds-Noirs in the context of the broader French contemporary discourse on the colonial past. He stresses the importance of disentangling the different actors in the public space, including, but not exclusively, the state. He nevertheless concludes that since in France national honor and colonial violence remain opposed and the experience of Pieds-Noirs tends to be merged with the colonial past as a whole, higher visibility of this issue since the 2000s has not been paired with reconciliation.

In a brief concluding chapter, Etienne François points to the relevance of comparison, especially if one looks at these two histories retrospectively. These two groups share claims to contested notions of martyrdom and victimhood and a curious mixture of nationalist and particularist discourse. He concludes that one cannot hope for a "common memory" but rather for a "shared memory," which would allow for the coexistence of different narratives (p. 278). In this respect, François estimates that France still lags behind Germany.

The last chapter is the only one that ventures a direct comparison and in which conclusions are drawn on this basis. Indeed, with its symmetrical arrangement, the comparison is built into the structure of the book rather than pursued systematically throughout. In the different contributions, only punctual and cursory references are made to the other case; it is up to the reader to draw lines across them. This division is a constant reminder of the complexity and specificity of the national contexts and forbids merging the two. This corresponds to the distinction put forward by the editors in the introduction between a "transnational" or "entangled" and "comparative" approach (p. 4). Ultimately, this is less about mutual influence than about how the two countries and their citizens dealt with a similar challenge. Yet as a result, the opportunity for further differentiation or other, perhaps at times more relevant, comparisons, such as, for example, between later ethnic German migrants (so-called *Aussiedler* or *Spätaussiedler*) and Pieds-Noirs is missed. Moreover, this means that in the end, the exercise of comparison is especially valuable to those who are familiar with both German and French history or know one of the cases well enough to be able to make meaningful connections themselves. To others, it may be difficult to grasp the significance of both the differences, similarities, and synergies.

This volume nonetheless constitutes a highly valuable collection of essays. It brings together

many of the best-known experts on either subject and showcases the increasingly sophisticated, critical, and professional character of research in these fields in recent years. Aside from the rewarding intellectual exercise of juxtaposition, it offers a comprehensive and solid introduction to both subjects. Last but not least, it may prompt further methodological experiments and comparisons, and this should certainly be welcomed.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-nationalism>

**Citation:** Gaëlle Fisher. Review of Borutta, Manuel; Jansen, Jan C., eds. *Vertriebene and Pieds-Noirs in Postwar Germany and France: Comparative Perspectives*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. February, 2018.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=51502>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.