

Conference 'Borders in the European Memories'. Frankfurt am Oder, March 5–6, 2015.

This [conference](#) is worth a post for several reasons. For one thing, the context was an embodiment of the title, because Frankfurt am Oder is by excellence a border place: spatially between Germany and Poland, and temporally between the past, when Germany was divided in an Eastern and a Western part, and the present, after a reunification not only of a country but also of a continent. This border quality of Frankfurt a/O can be sensed as one travels from Berlin and perceives in the cityscape the memory of the past regime and its social consequences. The contrast between the quietness of Frankfurt in the evening and the sparkling nightlife in Berlin is striking. But a sign of unity and continuity is the very name of the university where the meeting was held, [Europa Universität Viadrina](#), from the Latin Viadra for the river Oder, which marks the border in an unequivocal way. This university dates from 1506, but it was re-founded in 1991, after reunification; 40% of the students are from other countries than Germany, many of them from Poland, a country with which Viadrina university has strong scientific contacts. There were other reasons of interest in the conference, in which “borders” and “memories” - I underline the plural of both terms - were combined through a variety of historical approaches. Of course it is impossible for this post to make justice to two full days, during which some sixteen speakers presented their work. I will keep my own contribution (a presentation of our [project BABE](#) with some new material I have collected in the last year) for future posts. Just a very few examples from the rest of the papers to give an idea of how the conference spanned across times and spaces. Etienne François spoke about religious borders in Europe in the 17th and 18th century, especially between Protestantism and Catholicism, indicating the ability of the people to transform borders from religious into cultural and illustrating different memorial cultures. The difference of religious memories came out particularly at crucial moments of life such as birth, marriage and death, but was evident also in the different use of certain first names and of religious images in the homes as well as in perception of time linked to the difference of religious calendars. Etienne François showed very interesting maps of the results of religious differences in Germany throughout the centuries. [Nenad Stefanov](#) talked of the memory of political violence in the Yugoslav-Bulgarian border-region in the period 1920-1956. The fascinating aspect of his paper was the stress on subjectivity, on how the border was lived and remembered by people in the area. Some of his sources – such as letters between spouses, who were separated by national borders – were particularly suggestive of the affective side of geopolitical boundaries. Great importance to affectivity was given also by [Carolin Leutloff-Grandits](#), who reported on her research on contested border narratives in present day Knin, Croatia. She insisted on what she calls “soft borders”, which have to do with emotions, narrations and ideals, in contrast to what is usually understood as hard borders guarded by authorities of various kind. For me, one of the most capturing moments was the evening dedicated to the presentations by Simon Brunel of Atelier Limo and Stephan Felsberg of the [Institute for Applied History](#) at Viadrina. They both study, in their respective centers, the visual history of borders. [Atelier Limo](#) produces documentaries on border topics (such as the Schengen border), and organizes exhibitions and events. One recent documentary, *The Detour* (2011), presents a journey through the memory of Finland, Russia and Estonia. Stephan Felsberg’s main research interest are the fields of memory culture and the politics of history. The IAH has a number of [projects](#) funded all over Central and Eastern Europe.

The dialogue between the two presenters was exemplary: many short interventions throwing light on the interaction between the two project and suggesting new directions of research in a captivating way.