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**Birte Wassenberg**, *Vers une euroregion? La coopération transfrontalière franco-germano-suisse dans l'espace rhénan de 1975 à 2000*. Bruxelles, Bern, Frankfurt am Rhein, New York, Oxford, Wien : P.I.E. Lang. 487 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, glossary of terms, and index. €49.80 (pb). ISBN 978-90-5201-340-4.

Review by Malcom Anderson, University of Edinburgh.

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Birte Wassenberg has written a scholarly study of a development little known or understood outside specialist circles. Transborder co-operation between local and regional authorities, which commenced in embryonic form in Europe in the 1950s, is a low profile activity attracting few public figures of the front rank as participants and little media attention. It is symptomatic of the changes which had been taking place in the European political order. In its initial stages it encouraged much higher hopes for an erosion of the authority of European sovereign states than has been realized. This alludes to what is probably the main reason for the question mark in the title. Euroregions already exist, according to the definition of the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) — groupings of local/regional authorities divided by a state border with a permanent secretariat, a budget, and a basis in both public and private law — on all the internal and most of the external borders of the European Union. But they have not acquired any significant political autonomy and independence of action in relation to central governments and to the local/regional authorities which sponsor them.

This book is a case study with a sharp focus on tri-national co-operation on the Upper Rhine, taking account of broader developments only where necessary. This narrow definition of subject matter is justifiable in that there is much to describe and analyze in this region, which started this form of collaboration earlier and progressed further than elsewhere. But it is also frustrating because, when wider developments are mentioned, such as the Madrid Outline Convention of the Council of Europe (1980) for transborder cooperation and the three EU Interreg programs for financing this cooperation, some readers may wish to know how the consequences for the Upper Rhine differed from those elsewhere. Also, the literature referred to is mainly confined to the region and to the period under consideration, thus excluding authors who have made a substantial contribution to the general literature on transborder cooperation, such as Raimondo Strassaldo, and even those who have published prior to the period of the study on the region itself, such as Roger Baumert (although his unpublished thesis is mentioned under archival material) or Henri Febvre's classic study of the wider context of the Rhine valley.[1]

This narrow focus is of little importance to the well-informed, but is a drawback for the uninitiated. However, this book is written for the former rather than the latter category. It can be defended on the grounds that this is a history of a development in a specific geographical area and that the authors who were closely associated with the region or influential there and who were writing contemporaneously to the period of study, such as Viktor Von Malchus, Remigio Ratti, Philippe Leresche, Bernard

Vogler, and many others, should be given pride of place. The book is also based on a rich variety of other sources — archives (the most useful are in the category of “grey” literature i.e., in the public domain but of limited circulation) and profuse published documents from governments, territorial collectivities, the European Economic Community, the European Union, the Council of Europe, European associations and associations for transborder cooperation. This array of material is extremely well-exploited and the study contains much legal, administrative and technical detail. There is one omission which is regrettable. The author doubtless felt that the duty of reserve prevented her exploiting two sources — participant observation and interviews with key actors — which she was very well placed to do, as the person responsible for transborder cooperation for the Alsace Region for twelve years before she took up her present university appointment. This omission means that the reader gets very little impression of either how participants in the cooperation perceived the stakes and rivalries involved or the politics of cooperation.

In spite of these reservations, the study has many merits. It sets the context of transborder cooperation in the history, geography, economy and demography of the area under discussion. This first section commences with a striking quotation from the pioneer of co-operation in the region, Hans Briner. “The *Regio* (Northwest Switzerland, the *département* of Haut Rhin, and the south of Baden) is an area which includes the maximum number, the most varied, the most complex frontiers. Frontiers, nothing but frontiers: territorial, mental and others.” The brief sketch of the history of the region is done with admirable clarity although a little more detail on the post-1945 history would have been welcome, along with more detail on the evolution of preoccupations about the frontiers and about the development of the *Regio Basiliensis* under the active leadership of Hans Briner (even though most major contributions are noted in passing). By contrast, the institutionalization of cooperation in the period immediately after the 1975 Bonn agreement, between the Swiss, German and French governments giving this cooperation a basis in international law, is dealt with in considerable detail.

The second part of the book concerns the period from 1982 to 1991, when the regions (rather than inter-governmental initiatives) became the motor driving the cooperation. This was due to a variety of factors. The 1982 decentralization legislation in France was an important trigger because it gave authorization to the transborder cooperation in French national law although the activity's partisans were disappointed by the meager competences granted. The contrast between the highly centralized French system, the extensive autonomy of the Swiss Cantons and the Federalism of Germany had acted as a brake. But the new legislative development in France did not give any stimulus to the official consultative mechanisms. The regional authorities stepped into the breach with innovative ideas, initiating colloquia and symposia on matters of interest to a wide public — learning the neighbors' language, the universities, research and technologies — and which mobilized new kinds of participants in transborder activities. These were eventually replaced by tri-national congresses on topics such as transport and the environment. The progress made in this second period was disappointing despite the high level blessing to transborder cooperation given by President Mitterrand, Chancellor Kohl and Jean-Pascal Delamuraz, President of the Swiss Confederation, in the Basel Declaration of December 1989.

The third part of the book describes developments from 1991 to 2000, a period of greatly increased activity as a result of a financial incentive. This was funding from the European Union through the Interreg programs (the last of which was introduced

in 2000, after the end of the period of this study). These programs provided subsidies for transborder projects, jointly planned and jointly administered, often quite modest in scope. Cultural activities were one of the most dynamic sectors. They also stimulated the emergence of new transborder associations. PAMINA, for example, the association covering the north of Alsace and neighboring German Länder, was the result of a pilot Interreg program in 1988 and, on a micro-level, a great many GLCT (*Groupements Locaux de Coopération Transfrontalière*) which were in charge of specific projects. The Interreg programs placed transborder cooperation within the framework of European integration, giving it a higher profile and, at least in some quarters, greater legitimacy. The 1990s were a decade of expansion of activities, what the author calls a "re-dynamizing" of institutional cooperation and changing institutional forms (for example the establishment of the Conference of the Upper Rhine in 1991 and the *Regio TriRhena* in 1995). New developments were formalized by the Basel Agreement of September 2000 which replaced the 1975 Bonn accord by adapting it to new practices and by extending the competences of transboundary associations. This allows the author to end her study on an upbeat and optimistic note. But as she has shown in writing this history, there are ebbs and flows in activity and commitment. The dynamism of the 1990s was real, but the proliferation of overlapping arrangements, the multitude of projects, changes in structures and numerous meetings had the effect of completely baffling the ordinary, even reasonably well-informed citizens who drowned in a sea of acronym, could not understand who was responsible for what, and had no means of assessing whether transborder cooperation was important or not. The impact on public opinion, however, lies outside the scope of this study.

It is probably true, as the author asserts in her conclusion, that the transborder region of the Upper Rhine, the *Dreieckland* which extends over the territory of three sovereign States, is more integrated at the end of the period than at the beginning, although this is very difficult to measure. Officials certainly know one another and meet one another more but it is far from being an economic unit or the autonomous center of political power. Further progress from the high point reached in the 1990s is, at the moment, difficult to foresee. The end, in 2006, of the last Interreg program which gave a specific place to transborder cooperation in European cooperation removed a symbol and, to a more limited degree because money is available under other heads, a source of finance. Also, as the author rightly points out in her conclusion, the existence and enrichment of a "toolbox" of methods of cooperation is less important than a political will to press onwards to higher levels of integration. The failure of the great project of a European Constitution, through its rejection in a French (and a Dutch) referendum, and the revival of a narrow isolationist nationalism in Switzerland are bound to impact on mentalities at the local level to the detriment of transborder cooperation. But another development, to which the author alludes in passing but does not give the weight it deserves, but which is probably having more effect on mentalities, is the changed security functions of borders. The most obvious result of this change is the abolition of systematic police and customs border checks at the frontiers between EU member states and some non-members such as Switzerland; perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the international border, in this region as elsewhere in Europe have evolved as a consequence. The much greater physical and psychological ease of crossing borders, partly due to the abolition of border checks, has probably made more difference to ordinary citizens than all the agreements, arrangements and programs which the author painstakingly describes.

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NOTES

[1] See Roger Baumert, *La Regio* (Paris: Dalloz 1969) and Henri Febvre, *Le Rhin* (Paris: Colin 1935 [1st ed.], Paris: Perrin 1997 [2nd ed]).

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