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# Commemorating Together 1918/19.

**Exhibitions in France, Germany and Switzerland and  
the Three-Countries-Museum**

**Abstract** Different commemorative cultures between European countries influenced the profile of museums, especially since the last century. This is why the cross-border museum network in the Upper Rhine Valley regularly tries to provide knowledge about the neighboring countries and their history. One hundred years after the end of the First World War it presented 30 interconnected temporary exhibitions in France, Germany and Switzerland. The exhibition in the Three-Countries-Museum gave the general overview of the three countries in 1918 and the following years. The other exhibitions focused on special aspects of national, regional or thematic interest of that time. The essay describes scopes, difficulties and results of the process of four years to realize this cross-border project.

**Keywords** Three-Countries-Museum, museum network, cross-border, Germany, Switzerland, France

The culture of remembrance differs significantly between different European countries – especially since the First World War, which created many new nation states. This essay aims to describe the different memories of the First World War, explored in a museum project in France, Germany and Switzerland.<sup>1</sup>

The project referred to the Upper Rhine Valley and its neighboring regions, an area with a population of more than 10 million people. Here a museum passport, the so-called “Museums-PASS-Musées”, offers free admission to more than 320 museums in the three countries during one year. The passport costs around 100 euros. Around 50,000 passport owners take the opportunity to also learn more about the culture beyond the border.

A very active special group of these museums is working together in the so-called “museum network”. Its aim is to present an exhibition series on a common subject every four years. In 2014, the network presented 35 exhibitions about the First World War, seen from three different national perspectives.<sup>2</sup> The exhibitions were connected by their conceptual contents, a common website and common leaflets. The common catalogue was also presented to the presidents of France and Germany during their remembrance meeting 2014 at the Hartmannswillerkopf, a battle field of First World War in the Vosges (fig. 1, p. 28).

Motor and coordinator of this museum network is the Three-Countries-Museum. It is located in the border triangle of Germany, France and Switzerland and is the only museum of this kind in Europe. Its collections, its permanent exhibition, its temporary exhibitions and its activities consequently compare the history of the three countries in the Upper Rhine Valley.<sup>3</sup> Its publications show the variety of themes of the temporary exhibitions.<sup>4</sup>

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1 I thank Jeanette Gutmann for her support.

2 Moehring, M. ed. (2014) *Der Erste Weltkrieg am Oberrhein: 1 Thema, 3 Länder, 35 Ausstellungen*. Lörrach: Waldemar Lutz.

3 Moehring, M. (2012) Vom Altertumsverein zum Dreiländermuseum. In: Göckel, W. et al. eds. *Lörrach 2012*. Lörrach: Waldemar Lutz, pp. 62–71.

4 Some examples: Moehring, M. and Zückert, M. eds. (2000) *Halt Landesgrenze! Schmuggel und Grenzentwicklung*. Lörrach: Waldemar Lutz; Moehring, M. et al. eds. (2016) *Reiches Erbe – Industriekultur im Dreiland*. Lörrach: Waldemar Lutz; Kunze, P. (2017) *Reformationen. Der große Umbruch am Oberrhein*. Lörrach: Waldemar Lutz.



Fig. 1: The Presidents of France and Germany, François Hollande and Joachim Gauck, with the catalog of the museum network of the First World War and its coordinator Markus Moehring. © Dreiländermuseum Lörrach, 2014

After 2014 the next exhibition cycle of the network museum followed in 2018. It focused on the new epoch 1918/19, one hundred years ago. The German title was *Zeitenwende*, the French *Le Tournant* – in each language the meaning is a bit different. For four years, the partners met each other in the Three-Countries-Museum to discuss and coordinate their exhibition concepts and to learn more about the perspectives in the neighboring countries.

From the beginning the partners realized the great differences in the remembrance between their countries. An example is 11 November: in France this day is intensively remembered as the day of the Armistice in Compiègne in 1918 and a holiday every year. Most Germans do not have this in mind; for them the 11 November is connected with the beginning of the Carnival. Or Germans, like the Swiss, associate the day of St Martin with lantern processions for children.

Consequently, already during the first meetings there was no doubt for French museums: the end of the First World War would become an important subject in 2018. In contrast, German and especially Swiss museums of



Fig. 2: Overview exhibition to *Zeitenwende 1918/19* in the Dreiländermuseum Lörrach, with a special room showing Switzerland (red), France (blue) and Germany (yellow). © Dreiländermuseum Lörrach, 2018

the network hesitated in the beginning, not sure if they would attract public interest with this focus.

Finally the network managed to present 30 exhibitions.<sup>5</sup> As always, the overview exhibition was presented by the Three-Countries-Museum, comparing the situation in Germany, France and Switzerland. Three exhibition departments dealt with the historical situation in the three countries: one room dedicated to the end of the war, the dead and invalids; a second room with the economy and everyday needs; and a third room with the cultural break of the 1920s. Three other rooms illustrated the big differences of the development in France, Germany and Switzerland (fig. 2). It was interesting to see: most of the visitors knew only very little about their neighboring

<sup>5</sup> An overview about all 30 exhibitions in: Moehring, M. ed. (2018) *Zeitenwende – Le Tour-nant 1918/19*. Lörrach: Waldemar Lutz. More publications exist about many of these exhibitions.

countries – although they live nearby. How much the culture of remembrance changes at the border – this audience response is a basic experience every day in the Three-Countries-Museum.<sup>6</sup>

The other exhibitions focused on specific aspects, sometimes with significant differences between nations. Near the former battlefield of Hartmannswillerkopf in France, the Historial showed in its exhibition about the battle a huge tapestry from Aubusson, very famous in France: a pietà designed from skulls. In St Amarin, also in France, proud veterans opened their local exhibition with their flags – an unthinkable ceremony in a German museum. More modern was the opening of an exhibition in Colmar, France, the capital of Southern Alsace – very festive, with the tricolor everywhere, but also the European anthem as emotional highlight. Children with newspapers were shouting “vive la France” and “long live the return of Alsace to France” in French. A fake of course – because one hundred years ago nearly nobody in this region was able to speak French.

In France exists a tradition to remember the victory in 1918 and the horrors of the Great War. Unlike in the UK or the US, the French usually also remember the dead German soldiers of the First World War – even more than the German public does. But two themes were largely taboo in the public until 2018. During the first conferences of the museum network, the French colleagues were not sure how openly they could address them to the public: first, the friction and the resistance against the way this German-speaking region was reintegrated into the French state; and second, the expulsion of 120,000 so-called “Old Germans”.

After one hundred years these taboos have largely fallen away. The scenography of an exhibition in Strasbourg showed this impressively. One presentation showed the “selection” of the population, as French government called it that time; another showed the expulsion of people who emigrated (or whose ancestors emigrated) from Germany to Alsace during the German decades.

But why did these taboos exist for such a long time? After the trauma of Nazi occupation, the Alsatians wanted to demonstrate that they now had become good Frenchmen. But today, after decades of Franco-German

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6 Moehring, M. (2014) Dreiländermuseum Lörrach. Das Museum für die Deutsch-Französisch-Schweizerische Dreiländerregion/The Three Countries Museum Lörrach. The Museum for the German-French-Swiss Three Countries Region. In: Mele, M. and Peitler, K. eds. *Wem gehört die Geschichte?* Graz: Universalmuseum Joanneum, pp. 66–77.

friendship, the belonging of Alsace to France is no longer controversial between the two countries, and French has become the common language of this region. Now, after one hundred years, these difficult topics can be discussed in the public – even more so because the region is fighting against an administrative reform reducing regional autonomy.

It was hard to understand for the French colleagues: in Germany, the memory of the First World War is much weaker than in France. It took some time for them to realize that in Germany it is suppressed by the trauma of National Socialism, the Holocaust, the Second World War and its consequences. Nevertheless, for the first time, one hundred years later, many exhibitions about the First World War have been shown in Germany. However, they have not focused on the war, but rather on the foundation of the German republic at the war's end. For decades, the Weimar Republic had predominantly been seen as a state of crisis that ultimately led to Nazism. But in 2018, German museums for the first time remembered the Republic's political and social achievements. The House of History in Stuttgart focused on this aspect. In Karlsruhe, in the castle that Frederick II, Grand Duke of the German state of Baden, had to leave in 1918, the phenomenon of revolution was the main topic. And near the Three-Countries-Museum, an event in the pedestrian zone spread more knowledge about the rarely-known revolution one hundred years ago.

It took some time for the museum colleagues of France and Switzerland to understand the importance of the only successful all-German revolution. Both countries are proud of a rich republican tradition; in contrast, the German revolution appeared less important for them. Yet this revolution achieved still more: in 1918/19 Germany became the first large country in Europe to give women the right to vote. The Frankfurt History Museum presented this aspect in its exhibition. Another aspect was presented by the two old German garrison towns Rastatt and Müllheim: along the Rhine, Germany was demilitarized and all military facilities were destroyed.

In 1918, the great multi-ethnic states in Europe were dissolved. Europe was reorganized by national characteristics – especially demarcated by their language. That is why Switzerland – as a country of four languages with equal rights – became a special case in Europe. Switzerland today is still not a member of the European Union. The latter is discussed intensively by the public and right-wing politicians, but not the historical background of the Swiss approach, which began in 1918. In fact no Swiss exhibition presented this item; only the Three-Countries-Museum discussed it.

In Biel and Olten, two museums introduced the Swiss national strike in 1918 – a subject little known to Germans and French. Switzerland was on the brink of civil war because large parts of the population were impoverished by the war. Since that time, Switzerland's biggest crisis of the twentieth century was largely forgotten in public. The country preferred to emphasize its national unity since Hitler threatened it. Only now, one hundred years later, two museums of the network dealt with the topic. And as the Treaty of Versailles gave Switzerland the right to use the Rhine for shipping, an exhibition at the Swiss Maritime Museum in Basel explained how important this is for Switzerland even today.

Finally, art exhibitions enriched the project. In Bern, capital of Switzerland, an exhibition showed the breakthrough of Paul Klee on abstraction. In Ettlingen, Germany, an art exhibition presented an artist who created one of the first anti-war monuments in the 1920s. The artist Schneider, who had to leave Alsace-Lorraine after its return to France because of his German roots, was presented in the town of his exile: Rheinfelden, Germany. Presentations in Esslingen, Rheinfelden (Switzerland), Kehl and Stockach gave an insight into the very different local situation.

The culture of remembrance differs extensively between different European countries. With its projects the Three-Countries-Museum tries to highlight national-forming and strengthen the understanding of the people in the neighboring countries.<sup>7</sup> This ongoing work is significantly intensified by the trilateral series of exhibitions which the network of museums conducts every four years, organized by the Three-Countries-Museum since 1995.<sup>8</sup>

7 Moehring, M. (1999) Vergleichende Geschichte. In: Gervereau, L. ed. *Zur Zukunft der historischen Museen*, Paris: Association Internationale des Musées d'Histoire, pp. 43–50.

8 Netzwerk Museen: [www.dreilaendermuseum.eu/de/Netzwerk-Museen](http://www.dreilaendermuseum.eu/de/Netzwerk-Museen) [Accessed: 14 July 2019]. Publications about trilateral exhibition series since 1995: Chiquet, S. et al. (1995) *Nach dem Krieg – Après la Guerre*. Zürich: Chronos; Merk, J. and Moehring, M. eds. (1998) *Lörrach 1848/49. Essays, Biographien, Dokumente, Projekte*. Lörrach: Waldemar Lutz; Haus der Geschichte Baden-Württemberg ed. (1998) *Nationalität Trennt, Freiheit Verbindet: ein trinationales Ausstellungsprojekt*. Stuttgart: Giese Druck GmbH & Co KG; Wunderlin, D. ed. (2005) *Fasnacht, Fasnet, Carnaval im Dreiland*. Basel: Schwabe; and Moehring, M. and Delaine, J. eds. (2009) *Der Oberrhein um 1900 – Le Rhin supérieur vers 1900*. Lörrach: Waldemar Lutz.