

Citation style

Hudermann, Rainer: review of: Bronson Long, No Easy Occupation. French Control of the German Saar, 1944-1957, Rochester: Camden House, 2015, in: German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol. XL (2018), 1, p. 161-168, DOI: 10.15463/rec.1884824856

First published: German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol. XL (2018), 1

GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE LONDON

Bulletin



copyright

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

BRONSON LONG, *No Easy Occupation: French Control of the German Saar, 1944–1957* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2015), xii + 256 pp. ISBN 978 1 57113 915 3. £60.00

The Saarland, which lies in south-western Germany on the border with France, is one of the most interesting territories for an investigation of transnational entanglements and confrontations in Europe. Under various different sovereignties for centuries until the Versailles Treaty specified that, as the Saargebiet, it was to be administered by the League of Nations for fifteen years (1920–35), with France in a strong position, it can be seen as an early precursor of possible territorial Europeanization. In the plebiscite held, as prescribed at Versailles, in 1935 to determine the future of the Saar Territory or Territoire de la Sarre, an overwhelming majority voted in favour of joining Germany, although this had been under National Socialist rule since 1933. From 1935 to the present day the area has been known as the Saarland. In 1945 it first formed part of the French zone of occupation in Germany and then, in 1947–8, it was placed under the supervision of a High Commissioner, separate from Germany. In an economic and currency union with France, its semi-autonomous political status was unclear.

When European integration received a strong boost in 1950 with the plan put forward by Robert Schuman, the French foreign minister, for the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community, the Saar was soon a central source of conflict between France and the Federal Republic of Germany, founded in 1949. From 1952 this unresolved problem increasingly blocked progress towards European integration. Only when the French and West German governments agreed in Paris, in October 1954, to hold another plebiscite on the Saar in 1955, did European integration take off again. It led, surprisingly quickly, to the Treaty of Rome creating the European Economic Community.

In 1954–5 the Saarland was to receive a European statute to establish its independence, but in October 1955 a two-thirds majority voted to reject this. Within hours, France accepted that politically, this represented a vote for integration with West Germany, although this choice was not, officially, on the ballot paper. Politically, the

Trans. Angela Davies (GHIL).

BOOK REVIEWS

Saarland joined West Germany in 1957, followed in 1959 by integration in economic and social policy, providing an exciting example of how to deal with problems of integrating very different economic systems. Thus the Saarland played a key role in the reconstruction phase after the Second World War, both as a blocking force and in a positive, constructive sense. To the present day, it remains institutionally and politically the most international of Germany's federal states, right down to the fabric of its everyday life, with a special emphasis on Franco-German co-operation in a European perspective.

In a detailed synthesis, based largely on the evaluation of a wide range of documents from France and the Saarland, Bronson Long traces the complex development of the Saarland in a number of political areas from 1945 to 1957 for anglophone readers; the last large synthesis in English, by Jacques Freymond, dates from 1960. Long's core thesis runs through the whole book and is explored in great detail: 'a near obsession with de-Prussianizing the Saar drove the actions of French officials. As the war had destroyed Prussia, France's Saar policy was thus backward-looking in nature from the very beginning' (p. 27). 'French officials did not comprehend how deeply traumatic Germany's defeat was for both Germans and Saarlanders alike' (p. 19) and 'formulated many policies on the basis of what amounted to outdated ideas about Germany' (p. 23). 'What French officials failed to comprehend was that if Germany had needed "de-Prussianizing," the war itself had largely accomplished the task' (p. 22). Here Long rightly stresses a misapprehension that was widely held in Europe for a long time.

The author first outlines France's general plans for the Saar and, in line with recent research, claims that France's goal was not an annexation of the Saar, although this was widely demanded by the general public. Gilbert Grandval, who had been a leading member of the French resistance to German occupation during the war and was Military Governor in 1945, High Commissioner from 1947, and French ambassador to the Saar from 1952, thought that the Saar should become independent; he often spoke of Luxembourg as a model. Long considers that Grandval's aim was an independent Saarland nation. In Paris, by contrast, while different positions were taken on individual points, the main interest was in economically exploiting the region. Significant sections of French private industry, especially in the mining sector, however, were less than enthusiastic

because they feared competition from the strong industry of the Saar. After the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, the Saar became a key problem in Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's policy for France and for Europe, and led to sharp domestic political clashes connected with the general problem of reunification. Since the end of the war it had become increasingly clear that independence for the Saar was politically feasible only as part of a Europeanization of the country. This gave rise to an impressive review of earlier steps towards Europeanization in local political practice.

Long gives a broad account of France's cultural achievements. An early cultural agreement between France and the Saarland, among other things gave the young people of the Saarland chances to travel and take part in exchange trips as far afield as the USA. Nothing comparable could, at that time, be offered by any other part of the former Reich. Guided by his main question concerning presumed nation-building in the Saar, Long pays particular attention to the churches, sport, the school system, which was rebuilt immediately after 1945, and the establishment in 1947-8 of a new university which was successfully oriented towards Europe and could boast an international teaching staff. He rightly sees these developments in the areas he reviews as thoroughly positive. As an example, we need mention only the more than 10 million new school textbooks that had been produced by 1948 for the whole of the French occupation zone, far more than in the British or American zones. Because of its potential for generating mass enthusiasm, sport (mainly football) drew the special attention of the High Commissioner, and thus also of the author. The Saarland's strong sports clubs aspired to enter the Fédération Française de Football but, after long internal debate, were rejected on grounds of nationality as well as competition. At the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, the Saarland was represented by its own team. Finally, in the 1950s, they turned to the Federal Republic of Germany and in 1952 were runners-up in the national league, earning the enthusiastic support of the Saarlanders. Grandval, sharply critical of Paris, saw football as one reason for France's progressive loss of prestige in the Saar, and recent research supports this view.

Long also pays special attention to the churches. Within the Catholic Church, France wanted to create a new, unified bishopric of the Saar but failed because of the opposition of the Vatican and the bishops of Speyer and Trier, both of whom had responsibility for

parts of the Saar. On the Protestant side, attempts to bring together the church in the Rhineland, which was more critical of French policy, and that in the Palatinate also failed because of theological differences (Lutheran versus United) that were largely incomprehensible to the Governor, and political opposition. Here, too, it appears that all the important issues relating to the Saar were closely entangled with the area's general but unclear political status, and with its international position.

At political level, Long pursues the meandering developments in the status of the Saar, which remained largely undefined while granting France extensive opportunities for control. The many differences between the various authorities in Paris and, until 1949, at the High Command in Baden-Baden are described in broad brush strokes; in reality, they were even more complicated. Regarding the constitution of 1947, it is surprising that Long does not mention that Grandval, on his own initiative, had the people of the Saar draw up a constitution in line with German tradition, although Michel Debré, head of the Saar Department in the French Foreign Office and an opponent of too much independence for the Saar, had explicitly prohibited this. He had ordered the adoption of a completely different model with a weak government and weak parliament. Grandval's action meant that when the Saarland was incorporated into the Federal Republic of Germany in 1957, the constitution of 1947—allegedly imposed by France—could largely be adopted, once the provisions for economic and monetary union with France had been deleted. Long cites colourful examples to demonstrate how little Debré knew about conditions in Germany and the Saarland. Grandval sought permanent confrontation with Foreign Minister Robert Schuman, who had already rejected the introduction of the franc in the Saar. For Schuman, European integration and co-operation with the Federal Republic of Germany soon gained priority over autonomy for the Saar as championed by Grandval. Europeanization, however, brought a dilemma for Paris: the aim of autonomy for the Saar seemed to be achievable only through Europeanization, but this would indirectly strengthen the Federal Republic within Europe (pp. 187 ff.).

Long provides a differentiated analysis of the politics of the pro-autonomy governments of Minister President Johannes Hoffmann, who was initially highly popular, but soon became a controversial figure. On the basis of his experiences of National Socialism and exile

from 1935, Hoffmann had grave doubts about the capacity of the Germans for democracy, agreeing with Grandval on this. Out of this grew a policy of control that was designed specifically for the Saarland, and which gradually alienated ever larger sections of the population from his government which, until about 1951-2, had enjoyed broad political support given its close ties with France. This shift was caused not least by government surveillance, motivated by this mistrust, of political organizations that were critical of autonomy, something that was incompatible with the goal of democratization.

By 1954 the majority of the population seemed to endorse a Europeanization of the Saar. Its rejection in the referendum of 23 October 1955 is explained by Long as a result of the control policies of the Hoffmann period. He also sees it as a vote against France because of its contradictory policies: in its colonial empire France acted against its own aims of democratization and in Europe, the European Defence Community proposed by France was rejected by its own parliament, while at almost the same time, a European statute was proposed for the Saar. The author gives a lively account of the complicated and soon acrimonious debates within the Saarland in the summer of 1955, which led to the rejection and end of French supremacy and integration into the Federal Republic in the period 1957 to 1959.

This book is based on a wide range of official documents from party and private archives in France, Germany, and Switzerland (Fondation Jean Monnet). Especially interesting is the additional information gleaned from some of the private archives which were not available to earlier researchers (Bidault, Debré). The sources have been thoroughly evaluated and the majority of references is to archival material. A carefully prepared index facilitates the use of this book.

Long's main argument provides ample material for discussion. To the extent that he draws general conclusions about the whole of French occupation policy and policy for Germany from his work on the Saar, some of their basic outlines are not convincing. This is unfortunate, given the thorough work he has done in the archives. Our knowledge of French politics has moved on considerably since the 1980s, and it would have been good to hear his possible counter-arguments, all the more so as much of the archival material he uses has already been comprehensively evaluated in recent decades. Long quotes some of the many more specialized publications on the Saar and argues carefully and in great detail, whether he agrees with them

or comes to different conclusions. But apart from a few aspects of European policy, the basic research on the main lines of the European post-war order and French policy is only marginal to his analysis, and he therefore hardly engages with it discursively. He thus still takes positions, for example, based on the subjective political perceptions of contemporaries, or the partially erroneous interpretations of French policy by senior American decision-makers, such as the harsh but charismatic Deputy Commander in Chief, Lucius D. Clay, that have entered the research and been confused with France's actual positions. In the French files, as well as in the American files published since the 1960s, the necessary differentiations are clear. To take just one central example: the argument that France had pursued a policy of obstruction in the Allied Control Council and thus prevented the central economic administrations for the whole of Germany from working is inaccurate, as we have known for thirty years. France had an existential interest in German economic unity. But it demanded that the political decentralization of Germany as prescribed in the Potsdam Agreement should be implemented, and thus that 'German central agencies' (p. 32) should not be set up under German leadership, but that 'central agencies' should be created under Allied leadership—'bureaux alliés', 'allied agencies', in the terminology that Clay impatiently rejected as too complicated.

Still the most thorough work on French policy for Germany in the early post-war period, that by Dietmar Hüser, is occasionally mentioned by Long. But he does not discuss its basic findings, which contradict his main arguments. From 1945 France had pursued a 'dual policy for Germany': it may have used sharp rhetoric in public and towards Allied partners (as analysed by Long); but at the same time, in practice it followed a policy that was in many respects highly constructive, and whose core goals (decentralization and access to German raw materials in the mining sector) were realized in 1949. Hüser's work and the monumental volume by Armin Heinen on the Saarland (both published in 1996) offer a wealth of analyses even of the extremely complicated French decision-making processes, and they could have served Long well.

A number of errors that are seemingly small, but relevant to the interpretation, arise from the basic problem of contextualization. Under the League of Nations mandate the Saar region was not 'given to France' after 1920 ('Versailles . . . gave it to France', p. 2), but

France had a strong position within the international Governing Commission and as a consequence of French ownership of the mining industry in the internationalized territory. 'Saargebiet' was its official designation, not just what it was 'often simply called' (p. 35). The situation after 1945 was fundamentally different, and especially in Paris they learned from previous experience: France no longer had 'ownership' of the Saar pits as after 1920; Long mistakenly equates it with the sequester administration (pp. 41, 236, among others), but this was a decision not about ownership, but about administration and use; here the internal French fronts were again highly complicated and changeable. The author repeatedly confuses the *Arbeitskammer* (Saar Chamber of Labor) with the *Einheitsgewerkschaft* (unitary unions), a consolidation of all the trade unions in the Western zones. The *Arbeitskammer*, by contrast, was an original and important institution that existed only in the Saar and in Bremen and in which, completely against French tradition, unions and employers were represented on equal terms; it was not until the Saar's integration into the Federal Republic that it became a chamber of employees, which it remains to the present day. Nor did the USA put an end to the dismantling of industry in May 1946 (p. 30)—in individual cases, this carried on until 1951—but it stopped supplying reparations goods from its own zone to the Soviet Union.

These and other seeming details are probably connected with the author's main thesis in that they may contribute to a circular argument, for the strong focus on 'nation-building' in the Saarland allows the long-term successes of French policy to fade or disappear. In the area of culture, for example, which is Long's special interest, many further activities in museums, in modern music and art, art colleges, the media, theatre, film, and so on are overshadowed as a result of this approach. But they could have drawn attention to the fact that France's engagement in the Saar in these and many other fields was by no means a failure but, on the contrary, highly successful. Long repeatedly emphasizes that in 1945 France had revisited its aims of 1919, but this is not true. On the contrary, reflections on the failure of the Versailles peace order not only in the Saar, but in the whole zone of occupation since 1945 led to a variety of initiatives in a new policy designated 'democratization', which prepared the ground for future reconciliation after the establishment of the Federal Republic. At the same time, it was often the act—recognized as such—of focusing

BOOK REVIEWS

on old stereotypes that, in part conceptually but especially in practice, contributed to an attempt to change the allegedly aggressive 'German soul'. Long even refutes his own thesis that the majority vote against European status for the Saar had been a vote 'against France' when, on the final pages of his book, he describes the quick resumption of co-operation after 1955 and the consolidation of the French institutions built up in the Saarland in the decade after the war. Given that many of the factors described by Long clearly explain the result of the vote, it seems rather surprising that, in 1955, one-third of the votes nonetheless went to the vaguely formulated European Statute. This outcome reflects how strong the Saar's European orientation and its connections with France remained. The majority of the population saw the political future as lying in integration into the Federal Republic of Germany. But to the present day, the Saarland is the German Federal *Land* with the closest cultural, social, and institutional connections with France.

Such comments underline that Long's work stimulates very interesting discussions. His concisely written book provides information about many areas during these post-war years on the Saar, which were so exciting precisely because local, regional, bi-national, and international levels were always closely intertwined.

RAINER HUDEMANN is emeritus Professor of Contemporary History at Sorbonne Université. His recent publications include (ed. with Fabian Lemmes et al.) *Evakuierungen im Europa der Weltkriege – Évacuations dans l'Europe des guerres mondiales – Evacuations in World War Europe* (2014); (ed. with Alexander Friedman) *Diskriminiert – vernichtet – vergessen: Behinderte in der Sowjetunion, unter nationalsozialistischer Besatzung und im Ostblock 1917–1991* (2016); (ed. with Mathieu Dubois) *Historiographie allemande du Temps présent* (2016); and (ed. with Olivier Forcade et al.) *Exils intérieurs: Les évacuations à la frontière franco-allemande (1939–1940)* (2017).