
Conference Report

Day of Contemporary History in the Greater Region

Organizer: Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH) – University of Luxembourg; Center for Border Studies (UniGR-CBS) – University of the Greater Region

Date, Venue: 25.04.2025 – 25.04.2025, Esch-sur-Alzette

Report by: Alex Relicovschi / Machteld Venken / Klaus Behnam Shad, Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH), University of Luxembourg

The first Day of Contemporary History in the Greater Region was organized by the Research Area ‘Contemporary History of Luxembourg’ of the Centre of Contemporary and Digital History at the University of Luxembourg (C²DH). The Research Area produces new knowledge about the contemporary history of Luxembourg by studying phenomena and processes that have profoundly affected the country and whose transnational and comparative value exceeds the national perspective. The Day contributed to the transregionalisation of research on the contemporary history of Luxembourg by providing a multilingual space for the presentation and discussion of ongoing research with colleagues from the Greater Region.

The first panel discussed the usefulness of a transregional biographical approach for the study of contemporary history in the Greater Region. Analysing the life and involvement of the French aristocrat Jean Bertier in politics, economics and the military within Lorraine and Luxembourg from a transregional point of view, STÉPHANE EINRICK (Metz) arrived at interesting new findings. Most importantly, he demonstrated how Bertier managed to finance the campaigns for his political career as a senator in France thanks to monetary investment in the steel industry in Luxembourg. MACHTELD VENKEN (Luxembourg) reflected on the methodological limitations of the biographical method within transregional contexts while drawing on examples from her ongoing research on First World War veterans in the Greater Region. She emphasized the importance of making the conditions of archival preservation, access, selection, and interpretation transparent in order to integrate historical facts into coherent and meaningful narratives.

The second panel demonstrated how migration flows have shaped the history of the Greater Region over time through a range of historical, cultural, and linguistic perspectives. Case studies covered the period from the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 21st century. ARNAUD SAUER (Paris / Luxembourg) discussed the settlement of refugees in the Moselle area following Nazi Germany’s annexation of the Saar region in 1935. Based on sources from private archives, he showed the complexity of interactions between refugees and the local population in a politically unstable context on the eve of war, and reflected upon the changed feelings of belonging the upheaval provoked. DANIEL THILMAN (Luxembourg) retraced the trajectories of Jewish populations during the 1930s and 1940s in Luxembourg. He used the case of the Altschüler family to demonstrate that the different paths family members had taken resulted in different challenges of exile, life paths, and individual memories of war experiences after the return to Luxembourg of some family members in the aftermath of the war. Finally, ALINE DUMAIN

(Nancy) analysed mechanisms of preservation or loss of the Italian language within immigrant families in France and Luxembourg. She highlighted the role of Italian language learning, cultural manifestations such as the Villerupt film festival, and good diplomatic relations for the shaping of transregional identities in a cross-border region.

The third and fifth panel investigated the processes of deindustrialization and structural transformation in the Saar-Lor-Lux Greater Region, an area shaped by mining and steel production since the mid-19th century. In light of the major steel crisis of the 1970s and broader economic shifts in the "post-boom" period, the double panel analyzed how different actors experienced, perceived, and adapted to these profound changes. It highlighted the interconnectedness of the region and emphasized how cross-border dynamics and external economic engagements influenced local developments. BIRGIT METZGER (Saarbrücken) highlighted how mass layoffs and closures from the 1970s to the 1990s disrupted the long-standing promises of security once associated with the mining and steel industries. Drawing on the concept of "emotional communities", she examined how anger, nostalgia, and uncertainty were mobilized and negotiated within various social and political arenas. ZOÉ KONSBRUCK (Luxembourg) and STEFAN KREBS (Luxembourg) showed how the steel crisis was perceived and interpreted in the industrial towns of Esch-sur-Alzette and Dudelange. Through an analysis of municipal council records from the early phase of the crisis, they revealed that local actors often framed and temporally located the crisis in ways that diverged from macro-economic narratives. In the fifth panel, JOANA BAUMGÄRTEL (Saarbrücken) and FABIAN LEMMES (Saarbrücken) introduced their oral history-based project that aims to digitally preserve and analyze workers' testimonies from across the Greater Region. They discussed how interviews capture the subjective dimensions of industrial decline and transformation, while also raising important challenges for secondary analysis. Most importantly, their project seeks scholarly collaboration across national and institutional boundaries within the Saar-Lor-Lux region. Finally, NICOLAS ARENDT (Luxembourg / Vienna) traced how the 1992 acquisition of the Maxhütte rolling mill in Unterwellenborn by the Luxembourg-based steel company ARBED was embedded in Luxembourg's broader economic diversification strategy of industrial transformation, underpinned by strong state intervention and corporatist cooperation.

The fourth panel, titled discussed how digital technologies ranging from artificial intelligence to online platforms are transforming the ways historians engage with digital memory work. YANNICK FRANTZ (Luxembourg) presented the digital memorial [memorialshoah.lu](https://memorialshoah.lu/en) (<https://memorialshoah.lu/en>), a trilingual, participatory, and constantly evolving platform to document and commemorate the lives of Jewish individuals in Luxembourg who were persecuted under the Nazi regime. Emphasizing inclusion and transnational memory, Frantz highlighted the ethical challenges of digital commemoration, the use of metadata, and the importance of critical, human-led interpretation to preserve the dignity and complexity of individual stories. IRINA STENGER (Saarbrücken) and INNA GANSCHOW (Luxembourg) presented correlations between data from two digital research projects on migration and multilingualism among Ukrainian speakers – MultiLingID and WARTEST – related to age, education, gender, and language repertoires. They demonstrated that greater multilingual ability facilitates migration by means of nu-

anced statistical and qualitative analysis. Using an experimental approach involving AI-generated prompt extraction and collection, FRÉDÉRIC CLAVERT (Luxembourg) reflected on the implications of entrusting parts of memory-making to machines and the tension between human intention and algorithmic suggestion. His contribution calls for a more ethical questioning in the use of generative AI, especially when dealing with matters related to historical truth.

The conference also hosted a presentation of a selection of digital outputs of the Research Area 'Contemporary History of Luxembourg'. DENIS SCUTO (Luxembourg) presented the digital database of biographies of young Luxembourgian men conscripted to German labour services and armed forces included in the WARLUX website. CHRISTOPH BRÜLL (Luxembourg) and MURIEL VAN RUYMBEKE (Luxembourg) portrays the country's experience of occupation in an attractive multilingual format with among others video clips and interactive maps.

The Day of Contemporary History in the Greater Region concluded with a round table discussion on the usefulness of the concept of the Greater Region for the study of contemporary history, moderated by CHRISTOPH BRÜLL (Luxembourg) and with the participation of CHRISTIAN MARX (Trier – Munich), SONJA KMEC (Luxembourg) and STEFAN KREBS (Luxembourg). Used for the first time in the Luxembourgian press in 1966 and referred to more often during the industrial crisis in the 1970s, the concept was only used in a first conference of the Greater Region in 1995 and received its own institution ten years later. The panel agreed that the Greater Region is a relevant area to research common historical experiences, such as migration and desindustrialisation. The Greater Region has also been successfully used as a relevant space of comparative research on occupational regimes and the consequences of war. Panel members demonstrated how they use the concept of the Greater Region in their research. Whereas the book 'Inventing Luxembourg' unraveled the historical legitimization of the concept of the Greater Region, research on the history of cross-border cooperation has revealed that the concept of Saar-Lor-Lux was privileged above the concept of the Greater Region in debates of the European Parliament. That the project 'Remixing Industrial Pasts in the Digital Age' could not fulfil its ambition to expand its Luxembourgian focus to the Greater Region during the Covid-19 pandemic shows that crossing borders remains a requirement to conduct transregional research. Panel members were indeed unanimous that the study of cross-border topics requires cross-border research, and, to that purpose, promote increased collaboration between researchers, not in the least to facilitate access to sources from different countries. The panel members applaud existing collaboration opportunities such as the doctoral school of the Greater Region, Logos, and the Visiting Professorship of the University of the Greater Region. They see potential in the further development of the Working Group 'Border Temporalities' within the Centre of Border Studies of the University of the Greater Region and in a biannual iteration of the Day of Contemporary History in the Greater Region at different universities of the Greater Region.

Conference overview:

Introduction

Klaus Behnam Shad (Luxembourg) / Alex Relicovschi (Luxembourg): Welcoming

Christoph Brüll (Luxembourg) / Machteld Venken (Luxembourg): Opening Remarks

Panel 1: Transnational Biographies

Stéphane Einrick (Metz): Book Presentation: “Jean de Bertier (1877-1926). Un aristocrate à la frontière”

Machteld Venken (Luxembourg): “Beyond the Limits of a Biographical Approach for Transregional History?”

Jana S. Müller (Luxembourg): Moderator

Estelle Berthereau (Luxembourg): Discussant

Panel 2: Migration & Identity

Arnaud Sauer (Paris / Luxembourg): “Des Allemands en France : l’histoire de la présence sarroise en Moselle en période d’avant Seconde Guerre mondiale (1935-1940)”

Daniel Thilman (Luxembourg): “Jüdische (R)Emigration nach Luxemburg in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts, dargestellt am Beispiel der Familie Altschüler, unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der 1930er und 1940er Jahre”

Aline Dumain (Nancy): “La transmission de la langue italienne aux descendants d’immigrés. Regards croisés de part et d’autre des frontières”

Alex Relicovschi (Luxembourg): Moderator

Flagship Project – Digital Outputs of the “Contemporary History of Luxembourg” Research Area

Denis Scuto (Luxembourg): “The WARLUX Project”

Christoph Brüll (Luxembourg) / Muriel van Ruymbeke (Luxembourg): “‘WW2.lu’: A Digital Exhibition about the Second World War in Luxembourg”

Claude Ewert (Luxembourg): Moderator

Panel 3: The Deindustrialization of the Greater Region (Part I)

Birgit Metzger (Saarbrücken): “Perspektiven einer Emotionsgeschichte des Deindustrialisierung”

Zoé Konsbruck (Luxembourg) / Stefan Krebs (Luxembourg): “Luxemburgische Stahlstädte im Spiegel der Stahlkrise”

Christian Marx (Trier / Munich): Moderator

Panel 4: AI & Digital Memory

Frédéric Clavert (Luxembourg): “Artificielle ou humaine ? La mémoire collective au travers des ‘prompts’”

Yannick Frantz (Luxembourg): “Das *Mémorial digital de la Shoah Luxembourg*: Dokumentation und Gedenken im Digitalen Zeitalter”

Irina Stenger (Saarbrücken) / Inna Ganschow (Luxembourg): “Migrations- und Mehrsprachigkeitsforschung im digitalen Format”

Joé Voncken (Luxembourg): Moderator

Panel 5: The Deindustrialization of the Greater Region (Part II)

Joana Baumgärtel (Saarbrücken) / Fabian Lemmes (Saarbrücken): “Transnationale Arbeitswelten: mündliche Quellen und digitale Vernetzung in der Großregion”

Nicolas Arendt (Luxembourg / Vienna): “Luxemburg und die ostdeutsche Transformation am Beispiel der ARBED-übernahme der Maxhütte Unterwellenborn”

Christian Marx (Trier / Munich): Moderator

Final Session: Round Table Discussion

Christoph Brüll (Luxembourg), Sonja Kmec (Luxembourg), Stefan Krebs (Luxembourg)

Denis Scuto (Luxembourg) / Machteld Venken (Luxembourg): Closing Remarks and Farewell

Citation

Alex Relicovschi / Machteld Venken / Klaus Behnam Shad, Conference Report: *Day of Contemporary History in the Greater Region*, in: H-Soz-Kult, 23.08.2025, <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-156705>