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► **To cite this version:**

Benoît Vaillot. From Line on a Map to Realities on the Ground: The French-German Joint Boundary Commission at Work (1871–1877). *Beneath the Lines. Historical Geographies of Borders and Boundary Making (18th-20th Centuries)*, pp.59-72, 2022, 978-3-030-96903-5. 10.1007/978-3-030-96904-2_4 . hal-03979461

HAL Id: hal-03979461

<https://hal.science/hal-03979461>

Submitted on 8 Feb 2023

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From Line on a Map to Realities on the Ground. The French-German Joint Boundary Commission at Work (1871–1877)

Benoit Vaillot

Abstract

This contribution focuses on the French-German Boundary Commission that demarcated the French-German border from 1871 to 1877, after the German annexation of Alsace-Lorraine that followed the French defeat in the War of 1870. The genesis of this border cannot be summarised by the delineation drawn on the small-scale map attached to the Treaty of Frankfurt at the end of the war. It took no less than seven years for actors to draw the borderline in the field. From 1871 to 1877, a Boundary Commission—composed of French and German military and geographic engineers—worked on the ground to make the new border effective. During their activities, they erected more than 5000 border stones, made more than 900 maps and settled numerous conflicts, two of which we focus on. Thanks to the diary of one of the border commissioners and the collections of archives produced by the Commission in France and Germany, we study the birth of a border from a new angle. This study emphasises the room for manoeuvre that these officials had whilst

delimiting the border, as well as the role the inhabitants played by means of petitions, letters of protest and counter-mapping. This French-German case will be put into perspective with other Boundary Commissions encountered in our research.

4.1 Introduction

In September 1870, at the height of the Franco-German war, the geographical and statistical division of the Prussian general staff published a map of the “Territory of the General Government in Alsace”.¹ After the French defeat, a sinuous green line was added to this document on a 1:300,000 scale, delineating German territorial claims on paper for the first time (Delahache 1909). The map was attached to the preliminary peace treaty of 26 February 1871: the green line fulfils the function of delimiting the new Franco-German border. The territories ceded by France to the German Empire were not listed, but were vaguely defined as being located east of this border according to the first article. The green line delineated the territorial transfer, but did not specify the territories transferred. It corresponded to administrative boundaries (communes, cantons, districts, departments), as well topographical boundaries (mountain ridges) (Fig. 4.1).

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¹French diplomatic archives (La Courneuve) then AD, TRT 18,710,007. “Das Gebiet des General-Gouvernements im Elsass”, lithography by Leopold Kraatz, Berlin.

Fig. 4.1 The French-German border (1871). *Source* Prepared by the author



64 The question of the delimitation of the 1871
65 French-German border is well known (Hart-
66 shorne 1950; Roth 1992, 2008), but without
67 going into detail, it is nevertheless appropriate to
68 explain its two main rationales, which were
69 contradictory.² First of all, German nationalists
70 wished to strip all territories from France in

which they believed belonged rightfully to Ger-
many, on the grounds that the living populations
in these territories adhered to Germanic language
and culture, even if they spoke French in certain
social contexts and identified themselves as
French. This ethno-linguistic argument was
supported by Chancellor Bismarck, who sought
to achieve German unity under the aegis of
Prussia. Thus, the German-speaking areas of
Alsace and Lorraine were to join Germany, from
which they had been detached in the eighteenth

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²The question of the French-German border delimitation is detailed in my thesis: *The French-German Border (1871–1914). Territories, Sovereignties, Identities.*



82 century. Then, the Prussian general staff sought
83 to secure Germany by ensuring control of the
84 strategic strongholds in Alsace and Lorraine that
85 defended France. However, some of these mili-
86 tary places, such as Belfort and Metz, were
87 located in entirely French-speaking areas, where
88 doubts arose as to the ability of the inhabitants to
89 assimilate German culture. The green line drawn
90 on the map synthesised these ethno-linguistic and
91 strategic logics.

92 Nevertheless, French diplomats managed *in*
93 *extremis* to negotiate a modification of its route
94 around Belfort, within a radius that had to be
95 determined during the discussions for a final
96 peace treaty. In exchange, only three small
97 French villages, which had become German
98 memory spaces because of the exceptionally
99 violent fighting that took place there during the
100 war, were requested. But against all expectations,
101 at the treaty of Frankfurt of 10 May 1871, a new
102 counterpart was demanded from German diplo-
103 mats in order to determine the Belfort radius
104 conserved in France. German diplomats, having
105 become aware of the presence of iron in the
106 subsoil of the French villages immediately adja-
107 cent to the border, acquired some of them, and
108 used the discussions on the Belfort radius for this
109 purpose. The delimitation of the Franco-German
110 border also followed an economic logic, which
111 explains to a large extent the length of the
112 negotiations. Moreover, a surprising gentleman’s
113 agreement between a French diplomat and
114 Chancellor Bismarck led to a few villages
115 enclosed by the green line escaping annexation.

116 The creation of the border that separated
117 France and the German Empire between 1871
118 and 1918 is often summed up in this dimension
119 of delimitation alone. More generally, historiog-
120 raphy has for a long time limited the study of the
121 creation of borders to the aspects of delimitation
122 only, paying little attention to the aspects of
123 demarcation. It is true that the term “delimita-
124 tion” tends to absorb the term “demarcation”, but
125 these are two distinctive activities—admittedly
126 they are linked to one another.³ Indeed, public

³The phases of allocation, delimitation and demarcation can be identified in Jones and Boggs (1945).

127 international law distinguishes between the deed
128 enshrined by an inter-state agreement—delimita-
129 tion—and the deed materialising the border—
130 demarcation.⁴ The first one aims to set the
131 boundaries of an area and the latter aims to
132 materialise its layout. It is thus both a different
133 modality of action and also a change of scale.

134 The materialisation of the border is precisely
135 what is of interest here, when it ceased being a
136 cartographic and textual abstraction. The treaty
137 of Frankfurt stipulated that a “commission
138 internationale de délimitation” in French (*Gren-
139 zregulierungs Kommission* in German) to under-
140 take a field visit in order to “lay out the new
141 border”. In Europe, such commissions existed at
142 least since the Carolingian era⁵ and had increased
143 from the eighteenth century onwards (Nordman
144 1998). As García-Álvarez and Puente-Lozano
145 (2017) demonstrated, joint boundary commis-
146 sions were a crucial means of territorialisation
147 within the larger process of state-building in
148 Europe: they made tangible the abstract “border
149 on paper”. In the last thirty years, recent studies
150 have restored the activities of such commissions
151 not only in Europe, but in America (St John
152 2012), in Africa (Lefebvre 2015; Blais 2014),
153 and even in Asia (Ateş 2013) adopting a *from
154 below* perspective.⁶

155 In the case of the French-German border, this
156 perspective is made possible with the help of
157 original sources: documents from the joint
158 boundary commission on the one hand, and a
159 commissioner’s memoirs on the other. The former
160 represents a disparate amount of documents (let-
161 ters, minutes, reports, registers with descriptions,
162 maps, etc.), scattered in local and national

⁴Demarcation work for the 1871 French-German border was handled by a “commission de délimitation”.

⁵Indeed, the Verdun treaty of 843 sanctioning the split of the Carolingian Empire included delegates on the field in charge of the delimitation of the boundaries of each kingdom. See Dion (1947), Foucher (1988) or Mieck (1990).

⁶Also, concerning Eastern Asia, I found in the Hokkaidō prefecture archives (Sapporo) in Japan, the documents of the Russian-Japanese joint boundary commission which on the Sakhaline Island demarcated the border drawn by the treaty of Portsmouth of 5 September 1905.



163 archives, in both France and Germany.⁷ The
164 thousands of documents and maps which make up
165 this corpus can seem off-putting. The same is not
166 true for the recollections of Aimé Laussedat, a
167 military engineer who took part in the demarcation
168 process (Laussedat 1902). Although this source is
169 French leaning and contains errors, his input is
170 exceptional: he is the only one giving us an insider
171 perspective of the activities of the 1871 French-
172 German joint boundary commission in the field.⁸

173 A comparative reading of such technical
174 documents produced by the commissioners as
175 well as the own memoirs of one of them allows
176 for a tangible understanding of the production of
177 a border.

178 This paper presents an analysis of the French-
179 German joint boundary commission responsible
180 for the demarcation of the border delimited at the
181 Treaty of Frankfurt, highlighting both the inter-
182 actions between commissioners and local popu-
183 lations involved in boundary making, and the
184 multi-scalar nature of the process itself.

185 4.2 Preliminary Works

186

187 Soon after the Treaty of Frankfurt, the joint
188 boundary commission began preliminary work
189 on the demarcation. It was composed of technical
190 officials, mostly military, as many French as
191 German, who had received scientific training to
192 perform the geographical and cartographical
193 tasks indispensable for their missions. During the
194 demarcation phase, diplomats faded away, as
195 they were no longer playing the key role that
196 they had during the delimitation phase. Instead
197 commissioners Bouvier, Krafft and Laussedat on
198 the one hand, and Bruce, Herzog and

199 Hauchecorne (then Rhein) on the other lead the
200 operations on the field. These commissioners
201 worked respectively under generals Doutrelaine
202 and Strantz, who were in charge of the liaison
203 with their diplomats and general staff for all
204 conflicts unresolvable on site. French commis-
205 sioners followed the well-known tradition of
206 *ingénieurs géographes* (Konvitz 1987) whilst
207 their German counterparts were trained in mili-
208 tary geography, whilst Hauchecorne brought
209 with him his background as a geologist. He was
210 specifically instructed to ensure that as much
211 iron-rich subsoil as possible was annexed to the
212 German Empire (Beyschlag 1902).

213 One part of the joint boundary commission
214 was gathered in Metz, and another part in Bel-
215 fort, both places closed to territories negotiated
216 during Frankfurt discussions (Laussedat 1902,
217 pp. 79–84). There, commissioners perused,
218 studied and reproduced the “cadastral maps” of
219 all municipalities adjacent to the new border
220 (Laussedat 1902, pp. 79–84). Indeed, since
221 medieval times, borders in Europe were traced
222 from municipal boundaries—formally parishes
223 (Dion 1947, pp. 79–84). The territorial integrity
224 of this administrative unit was very rarely ques-
225 tioned, as it represented the unit on which basic
226 tax is calculated (Paasi 1997). Surveyors Laloy
227 and Hufnagel sketched out the land register to be
228 taken on site by the commissioners.

229 During the summer of 1871, several brigades
230 were spread over different lengths of the border
231 before establishing the demarcation—picketing
232—with the help of municipal civil servants, road,
233 canal and port engineers and at times forestry
234 officers.⁹ Thanks to the cadastral maps, the
235 commissioners supervised the operations with
236 the local mayors and local civil servants who
237 provided information about the boundaries of
238 their municipalities.¹⁰ Commissioner’s sought to
239 locate existing boundary markers on the ground

⁷AD, 2Q0 203 à 204. Boundary commission between France and Germany (1870–1878); Bas-Rhin local archives (Strasbourg) then ADBR I. Notizen über die Tätigkeit der internationalen Grenz-Regulierungs-Commission und Verlauf der Grenz-Arbeiten, août 1872, 71 AL 7. Grenzregulierung 1871–1879; German federal archives (Berlin) then BA, R 901/36610. Die Grenzrevision zwischen Elsaß-Lothringen und Frankreich 1872–1879.

⁸AD, 2Q0 203. Composition of the boundary commission between France and Germany, March–May 1871.

⁹AD, 2Q0 203. General Doutrelaine to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2 October 1871.

¹⁰AD, 2Q0 203. General Doutrelaine to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 26 June 1871; Territoire de Belfort local archives (Belfort) then ATB, 1 M 388. General Doutrelaine to sub-prefect of the Territoire de Belfort, 1 October 1871.



240 demarcating municipalities, counties or state
241 forests (Laussedat 1902, pp. 79–84). Between
242 Sancy and Lommerange for example, they reused
243 forest border stone dating back to 1784.¹¹ The
244 correct border was thus the one which used
245 ancient boundaries, legitimised by time.

246 It was common for commissioners to live
247 together during their operations (Rebert 2001).
248 Wilhelm Hauchecorne therefore proposed to his
249 counterpart Aimé Laussedat to stay together
250 under the same roof, which later refused under
251 the pretext that he preferred travelling with his
252 wife. He felt he could not accept this gesture of
253 friendship because the war had led to the dis-
254 memberment of his homeland (Laussedat 1902,
255 pp. 85–104). With these two men, one can
256 already see the future rivalry between the French
257 school of geography and the German one at the
258 end of the nineteenth century, as both would
259 become important geographers. The specificity
260 of this joint boundary commission is that it was
261 set up immediately after the peace treaty, literally
262 the day after, when passions had not subsided.
263 Otherwise, commissioners generally had a pre-
264 liminary agreement about the exact line of the
265 border to follow, pending later changes to be
266 decided on the ground.

267 The initial programme aimed to complete the
268 demarcation within one year; although
269 this overlooked that fact that on the ground, the
270 process would spark a growing number of con-
271 flicts.¹² The section between Luxembourg and
272 the Moselle River will now be explored as an
273 example. The brigade there was headed by
274 Laussedat and Hauchecorne. Local communities
275 expressed their discontent when witnessing the
276 demarcation operations. Inhabitants of Hussigny,
277 Thil and Villerupt pulled pickets out during the
278 night, compelling the commissioners to redo the
279 surveys and peg these again (Laussedat 1902,
280 pp. 85–104). This behaviour was encountered by
281 every joint boundary commission. But here, the

282 inhabitants' patriotism expressed in the French
283 and German archives is not only instrumental.
284 Populations divided by the border are well
285 known by historiography as having been inte-
286 grated early on into the national "imagined
287 community" in France, despite cultural singu-
288 larities, mainly due to the early construction of
289 the French state (Maissen 2020).¹³ The mayor of
290 Boulange ostensibly took his time in order to
291 hinder the operations. The elected official stated
292 that he was "not in a hurry to become Prussian"
293 (Laussedat 1902, pp. 85–104). Elsewhere,
294 between Briey and Mars-la-Tour, Laussedat was
295 stopped by a woman accusing him of giving up
296 on them, adding: "We will never be Prussians";
297 which did not fail to annoy Hauchecorne
298 (Laussedat 1902, pp. 85–104).

299 On another note, the brigade disagreed on the
300 boundary line near Crusnes, which was claimed
301 by both commissioners. The treaty stipulated that
302 the new border must hug the western boundary
303 of Aumetz. Equipped with cadastral maps,
304 Hauchecorne argued that the village of Crusnes
305 belonged to Aumetz, and thus assigned to the
306 German Empire. He wanted this village at all
307 costs, because its soil is ferrous. Laussedat
308 asserted that the village became a municipality in
309 1833, according to the *Dictionary of municipa-*
310 *lities in France*, and was thus not assigned. As
311 one can see, during the 1870s, commissioners
312 could rely on obsolete maps from the beginning
313 of the nineteenth century and on non-technical
314 books. Without an agreement, the issue was
315 postponed and handed over to the governments.
316 In the end, diplomats decided that the French
317 commissioner was right.

318 A municipality could be deemed to be either
319 French or German depending on one's perspec-
320 tive. For example, Juvrecourt was located within
321 the district of Château-Salins which was assigned
322 to Germans. Yet, the village was located on the
323 southern side of the mountains separating the
324 Seille and Moncel rivers, which should have

¹¹Meurthe-et-Moselle local archives (Nancy) then ADMM, 4 M 175. Report from the general forest officer, 5 January 1874, Summary note of the boundary commission.

¹²AD, 2Q0 203. General Doutrelaine to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 26 June 1871.

¹³This is confirmed by the massive emigration of Alsace-Lorraine inhabitants at the beginning of the 1870s.



325 theoretically belonged to the French.¹⁴ But
326 according to the green line on the map, Juvre-
327 court should be annexed to the German Empire.
328 Such contradictions were not unusual in treaties,
329 and it was up to the joint boundary commission
330 to find a solution.¹⁵ General Doutrelaine felt that
331 the map was “small-scaled (1:300,000), that the
332 contours did not appear, that the green line was
333 drawn roughly and that the delimitation of this
334 map should not prevail over the one described in
335 the treaty, when conflict arises”.¹⁶ There was no
336 objection from the German commissioners, and
337 so the village remained in France. This example
338 speaks to the fact that there was room for
339 manoeuvre, at the will of the commission, away
340 from any government intervention.

341 The archives reveal the local population’s
342 agency during the demarcation phase. For three
343 weeks in June 1871, residents of Chavannes-sur-
344 l’Étang hoped to remain French, relying on maps
345 drawn for representatives throughout the ratifi-
346 cation of the Treaty of Frankfurt. On these hand-
347 drawn maps, put together quite hastily to show
348 the land loss for France, the village was not
349 annexed to the German Empire, even though the
350 treaty left no uncertainty on the issue. Inhabitants
351 made claims relating to the village’s geography,
352 history and culture, arguing that their municip-
353 ality was “primarily French in terms of lan-
354 guage and way of life”, that it was located
355 “entirely in the Rhône basin” and that it had been
356 “part of France for centuries”.¹⁷ They mobilised
357 ethno-linguistic, geographical and historical
358 arguments to remain French at all costs. This
359 mobilisation remained unsuccessful: an ill-
360 conceived map gave inhabitants hope they
361 could escape their fate, the joint boundary com-
362 mission strictly applied the treaty and made them
363 become German.

This example was not isolated: commissioners
collected petitions, complaints and grievances.¹⁸
Inhabitants also produced sketches of their own
plots, which were hardly useable for the com-
missioners.¹⁹ However, some people were more
influential than others or at least spared no effort
to influence the joint boundary commission.
Large landowners are amongst those.²⁰ In
Audun-le-Roman, Robert de Wendel, steward of
Villerupt’s forge and foreman of forges in
Hayange, Moyeuve-Grande and Stirling-
Wendel paid a visit to the commissioners
himself (Laussedat 1902, pp. 105–145). The
wealthy industrialist family was worried that the
new border could dismantle its empire. They
submitted corrections for the boundary line:
German commissioners were willing to consider
them but demanded compensation, which was
refused by the French commissioners. Local
populations were convinced that the Wendel
family aroused the cupidity of the Germans
commissioners to move the line westward, rather
than eastward.²¹

In late summer 1871, the picketing process
was completed along the full-length of the bor-
der, but demarcation operations fell behind due
to conflicts having emerged about the munic-
ipalities of Avricourt, Raon-lès-Leau and Raon-
sur-Plaine. By means of prefects, commissioners
requested feedback and comments from all cor-
porate bodies about their preliminary works,
which would be examined in the autumn. Far
from being forgotten, local actors were indeed
essential for a clear demarcation of the border.
Mayors, local leading figures, took integral part
in the activities of the commission. Procurators,
rectors and education officers, chief municipal
officials, forest officers, presidents of chambers
of commerce, bishops, etc. submitted various
pieces of information in the best interest of their

¹⁴AD, 2Q0 203. Minister of the Interior to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 5 June 1871.

¹⁵The same contradiction appeared between the small-scale maps and the description of the boundary in the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848. See St John (2012).

¹⁶AD, 2Q0 203. General Doutrelaine to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 22 June 1871.

¹⁷AD, 2Q0 203. Minutes from the city council of Chavannes-sur-l’Étang, 7 June 1871.

¹⁸ADMM, 4 M 175. General Doutrelaine to Prefect of Meurthe-et-Moselle, 2 November 1871.

¹⁹For the maps produced by the residents reused by the cartographers, see Basset (1998) and Byrnes (2001).

²⁰AD, 2Q0 203. General Doutrelaine to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 July 1871.

²¹AD, 2Q0 203. Ministry of Foreign Affairs to General Doutrelaine, 2 October 1871.



404 respective activities in order to establish a func-
405 tioning border. Once the preliminary work had
406 been carried out, the installation of the boundary
407 marker was possible.

4.3 Of Border Stones and Maps

408 In winter 1871, field visits were suspended: as
409 temperatures could be extremely low at this time
410 of the year, particularly along the crest line of the
411 Vosges Mountains.²² It was the time when
412 commissioners gathered again in Metz in order to
413 plan the final demarcation and to agree on the
414 surveying and description of the new border. For
415 each of the ten sections, a French-German team
416 of two surveyors took over the process, follow-
417 ing the work done the previous summer under
418 the supervision of their respective commis-
419 sioners. The preliminary works were verified
420 according to maps and local residents. Following
421 the laying of boundary markers, each surveyor
422 drew out the delineation of the border and, using
423 a 100-m strip on each side, logged it into a reg-
424 ister and recorded it on two types of maps:
425 1:1250 scale detailed maps giving information on
426 measurements, plots and the location of border
427 stones; and 1:20,000 scale overview maps, made
428 from the land register and enhanced using sket-
429 ches completed on the ground, which contained
430 the administrative boundaries, the location of
431 official and natural landmarks (and sometimes
432 even the boundaries of banality rights)²³.

433 Each map had to be certified by the surveyors
434 and then validated by the joint boundary com-
435 mission (García-Álvarez and Puente-Lozano
436 2017). Permissible differences could not exceed
437 1/1000th for the sides of the polygons and
438 1/500th for angles and apexes. The commis-
439 sioners relied on measurement instruments
440 invented or fine-tuned in the nineteenth century,
441 such as the aneroid barometer to measure altitude
442 or the theodolite to measure angles. They

²²AD, 2Q0 203. General Doutréline to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 26 June 1871.

²³ADMM, 1 F 121. Overall plan of the border 1871. ATB SM 98. Overall plan of the border 1871.

445 succeeded in getting a sharper demarcation
446 thanks to geodesy and photography. The making
447 of these maps was then used to produce ones of
448 smaller scales. German commissioners produced
449 more maps than their French counterparts and
450 favoured a larger scale, in order to become better
451 acquainted with local realities which remained
452 foreign to them: 727 sheets at a 1:1250 scale and
453 22 at a 1:20,000 scale for the Germans versus
454 101 and 15 for the French, which partly explains
455 the delay with the delimitation. German commis-
456 sioners were charged with surveying the ter-
457 ritory and gathering a wide range of types of
458 information about inhabitants, they took posses-
459 sion of the territory through its systematic car-
460 tography, behaviour particularly common in a
461 colonial context (Lefebvre 2015).

462 The description of the border was achieved
463 with the help of maps, but also recorded in tabular
464 form based on the boundaries of plots on the
465 cadastral maps.²⁴ Surveyors carefully recorded the
466 position of each boundary marker in registers. The
467 description was both geometrical (angles of the
468 border-polygon, distance between each boundary
469 marker, etc.) and topographical (boundaries of
470 plots, middle point of the ditch, embankments,
471 etc.). A statement roughly describing the section
472 precedes each register. These registers had to be
473 certified, validated and in line with the maps.

474 Beyond the abstraction on paper, the border
475 became a material reality, rooted in the land,
476 which remained understudied nonetheless (The-
477 venon 2005). Since 1872, approximately 5500
478 boundary markers were placed between Luxem-
479 bourg and Switzerland by ten brigades from the
480 commission.²⁵ A total of 4056 major border
481 stones indicating angles were accounted for and
482 another 1500 secondary ones indicating

²⁴AD, 2Q0 203. Schedule for the delimitation, surveying and the description of the international French-German boundary, 29 January 1872; ADBR 1J. Notizen über die Tätigkeit der internationalen Grenz-Regulierungs-Kommission und Verlauf der Grenz-Arbeiten, August 1872.

²⁵AD, 2Q0 203. Specifications for the supply and engraving of the border stones intended for the determination of the international French-German border; General Doutréline to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 15 April 1872.



intermediate points, which equals to an average of one every hundred metres, in such a way that one could spot the previous one when located at the foot on one of them. An angle indicating where the border lies was engraved on the top surface of each stone, and its number along with two letters on its visible surface: “F” for the French side, and “D” for the German side. In the course of its work, the joint boundary commission explicitly referred to measures taken by other commissions for other borders, which makes it possible to admit evidence of the circulation of geographical knowledge. For example, the border line was cleared of scrubs for one metre on each side, as the French-Italian joint boundary commission of 1860 had done. The border was thus perfectly visible on its delineation: no one could pretend to overlook it.

The delimitation represented a profitable market for local entrepreneurs, as the operation was estimated to cost 139,000 francs, evenly allocated between the two states.²⁶ Several entrepreneurs took part in the tender process introduced at the beginning of 1872. Wagner, a German architect recently settled in Metz, won the tender and committed to respect the specification: 26.50 francs per major boundary marker and 22 francs per secondary one. The selected type of stone had to be smooth, uniform, resistant to frost, could not crack nor be produced against the grain. The company worked under the surveyors’ scrutiny and was to incur penalties in the event of any delay. Such difficulties did indeed occur in the Vosges region, due to the topography and cold weather; here the installation of boundary markers was only completed in the spring of 1873.

The issue of the maintenance and protection of the border stones rapidly emerged, which the joint boundary commission had not thought about. Some noticeable damages were noticed as early as 1872: the people responsible were almost exclusively residents from the newly annexed territories. Governments encouraged local authorities to “take the necessary measures

in order to prevent any wilful or unintended damaging by the nearby populations”.²⁷ The first adopted measure was to make mayors responsible for the damages or destruction of boundary markers on the land of their municipality, in order to stop the “code of silence”. A second measure aimed to have repairs or the replacement of border stones be processed by a French-German commission appointed directly by the governments. Each repair or replacement had to obtain the agreement of both parties; minutes had to be ratified by the governments who shared the cost equally. This procedure had to be repeated as many times as necessary and remained in practice until the start of the First World War.

A huge part of the demarcation work was accomplished at the beginning of the 1870s, with commissioners travelling along the border multiple times, picketing and delimiting. At the end of 1873, the border was materialised and tangible. Although most of the work was achieved without any great difficulty, some sections witnessed tensions because of disagreements about the delimitation, which significantly slowed down the work of the commission.

4.4 Two Demarcation Conflicts: The Two Raons and Avricourt

As discussed above, local populations organised themselves to look after their interests. It was not unusual to have multiple interpretations of the border delineation during the demarcation process because the negotiators unknown some realities on the ground (St John 2012). This is what happened in Raon-lès-Leau and Raon-sur-Plaine, where the emerging tensions deserve to be studied in detail. Their allegiance either to France or the German Empire was widely discussed by the commissioners, who also modified the border delineation near Avricourt, due to the location of a railway: indeed, it compromised the establishment of a working border for both the states and residents (Laussedat 1902, pp. 105–145).

²⁶AD, 2Q0 203. General Doutrelaine to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 7 March 1872.

²⁷ADMM, 4 M 1716. Minister of the Interior to Prefect of Meurthe-et-Moselle, 15 November 1872.



571 According to the treaty of Francort, the
572 delimitation line was indeed supposed to be
573 modelled on the western district boundaries of
574 Château-Salins, in the Meurthe department, and
575 the Schirmeck canton, in the Vosges department,
576 where Raon-lès-Leau and Raon-sur-Plaine were
577 located. However, it was also expected that the
578 border followed the ridge line of the mountain
579 which did not follow the municipalities' bound-
580 aries exactly, which is why the delimitation line
581 seemed to exclude the two municipalities from
582 the annexation. Due to the contradiction between
583 an administrative logic and a topographical one,
584 the two villages could thus be considered either
585 German or French.²⁸ Aware of this, inhabitants
586 rallied local and national actors in order to avoid
587 being annexed, even if it cost them dearly.

588 As the French government claimed to be
589 willing to negotiate, German commissioners
590 demanded the withdrawal of French civil ser-
591 vants from the two municipalities. De facto and
592 *de jure*, the German Empire had sovereignty over
593 Raon-lès-Leau and Raon-sur-Plaine (Laussedat
594 1902, pp. 105–145). Civil servants were chased
595 out in July of 1871 and the German authorities
596 pressured the municipal council to acknowledge
597 German sovereignty. For example, the French
598 postman collecting the mail was arrested for
599 “theft from the German postal service”. Inhabi-
600 tants submitted a petition to the President, in
601 which they revoked their elected officials con-
602 sidered as traitors. Then they wrote to their rep-
603 resentatives in order to put pressure on the
604 government for the villages to remain in France.
605 The situation was so tense that the mayor of
606 Raon-lès-Leau was thrown in jail by the German
607 authorities. The joint boundary commission
608 investigated, and Laussedat concluded that the
609 mayor, “a simple man in both heart and spirit, but
610 also stubborn and an ardent patriot, held out with
611 more obstinacy rather than reason”.²⁹

The tenacity of the residents paid off as the
German commissioners accepted to withdraw the
two small villages at the end of 1871, although
retaining the state forest and the landlocked
properties.³⁰ Landowners complained, although
they were happy not to become Germans. Raon-
lès-Leau lost 1100 hectares, which represented
nine tenth of its surface area, and Raon-sur-
Plaine lost close to 700 hectares, about two third
of its surface area. The separated forest areas
were added to the German municipality of
Gandfontaine, which resulted in a very original
demarcation: the new border delineation fol-
lowed the edge of the forest domains for 18 km,
which requires no less than 152 boundary
markers. The mayor and priest of Raon-sur-
Plaine described the joy of the residents for
“being returned to the motherland” (Laussedat
1902, pp. 131–134). However, this joy was short
lived, as the village’s economy was tied to the
forest; residents were dependent on the unre-
stricted collection of dead wood for cooking and
heating, whilst municipalities relied on the forest
for revenue.

The French commissioners argued for the
government to buy back the forest areas, without
success because “Germany considers the moun-
tain and the *col du Donon* to be of the utmost
strategic importance”.³¹ The retaining of the
local woodlands allowed the German army to
reinforce its strategic position at the mountain top
which peaks at 1009 m. Ultimately, the issue was
settled: since the “excessive sinuosity of the
demarcation line” prevented the effective moni-
toring of the border by agents from both coun-
tries, the commissioners gave back to France in
1872 a forest house and two sawmills, in
exchange for the cession of three plots practically
hemmed in German territory. Forests were very
often the object of conflict during the demarca-
tion phase, due to their strategic importance for

²⁸The German commissioners support the connectedness theory (*major pars trahit ad se minorem*): the annexation of the district and the county affects all municipalities within, even the ones located on the western side of the mountain. Laussedat (1902).

²⁹AD, 2Q0 203. General Doutrelaine to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 30 August 1871.

³⁰AD, Additional convention to the 12 October 1871 peace treaty, article 10; ADBR 87 AL 581. Die Landesgrenze zwischen Deutschland und Frankreich 1873–1918.

³¹AD, 2Q0 203. General Doutrelaine to Prefect of Meurthe-et-Moselle, 5 September 1872; Moselle local archives (Metz) then ADM 2 AL 3. Abtretung der Gemeinde Raon-les-Leaux.



653 states and their economic importance for the
654 inhabitants. The French-Spanish boundary
655 commission had also faced this problem in 1847 with
656 the Iraty forest (Puyo 2002). The flexibility of the
657 German commissioners here can easily be
658 explained, they kept everything that had an
659 economic and strategic interest, whilst getting rid
660 of extremely hostile and French-speaking
661 populations.

662 An issue of a different type arose in Avricourt;
663 however, this time the joint boundary commis-
664 sion immediately reached an agreement regarding
665 the necessary changes. The train station of the
666 village, which was due to become German, was
667 located simultaneously on the Paris-Strasbourg
668 international line and at the junction leading to the
669 small stations of Dieuze in Germany and Cirey in
670 France (Laussedat 1902, pp. 131–134). The
671 commissioners realised that a faithful fulfilment
672 of the border delineation would complicate border
673 controls, railway traffic and the everyday life
674 of the residents all at once. Indeed, the entire
675 municipality of Igney and part of Avricourt
676 would end up hemmed in French territory by the
677 railway line, disconnected from the rest of the
678 annexed territories. It would make it impossible
679 for residents to get to German territory directly
680 without passing through France, unless they cross
681 a level crossing. Another issue was the fact that
682 French trains would have to transit into German
683 territory for a few hundred metres.

684 French commissioners thus proposed to move
685 the border by 6 kms at the railway line, which
686 resulted in all railway infrastructure remaining in
687 France. This solution solved the problems iden-
688 tified by both parties, but had the disadvantage of
689 divesting the German Empire from having a
690 strategic railway junction and a station located on
691 the international line connecting Paris to Stras-
692 bourg, and thus to Berlin. The French proposi-
693 tion was however accepted, on the condition that
694 a new railway station be built on the German
695 side, paid for by the French government.³² In
696 October 1871, the commissioners sealed the

697 agreement: Igney and the portion of Avricourt
698 located south of the railway line were returned to
699 France. This small plot of land was thus under
700 German sovereignty until 1 January 1872. The
701 portion which remained German, north of the
702 line, took the name of Deutsch-Avricourt.

703 Whilst awaiting for the Deutsch-Avricourt
704 station to be built, the existing station and the
705 railway infrastructure were returned to France,
706 but the German government enjoyed its use
707 without restriction and governed it in terms of
708 policing, justice and customs. The splitting up of
709 Avricourt had thus resulted in two mirror-
710 municipalities, each being the border stop of
711 their respective state for roads and trains until
712 1914—a border crossing unintended by the treaty
713 so to speak. In the two Raons, as well as in
714 Avricourt, the integrity of the municipality was
715 not respected in the name of pragmatism and
716 realities on the ground. The settlement of these
717 two demarcation conflicts led to changes in the
718 delimitation line decided by the Treaty of
719 Frankfurt, that is why each one of these joint
720 boundary commission agreements led to the
721 signing of a delimitation agreement by the
722 French and German governments.³³ The demar-
723 cation work involved inhabitants mobilisation
724 and resulted in a change in the delimitation of the
725 boundary, reversing the simple centre versus
726 periphery dynamics of imposition and
727 contestation.

4.5 Make Sovereignty Possible

728 If the demarcation of the border could upset
729 inhabitants, the joint boundary commission could
730 also retain pre-existing relations, or better, make
731 use of their assistance, if this facilitated the
732 exercise of sovereignty, and the work of the
733 customs administrations in particular. The com-
734 missioners indeed considered local realities in the
735 minutes of the demarcation in 1877,
736
737

³²ADBR, 1 AL 58. Settlement of the financial dispute between the two municipalities split by the border and the ones restored to France.

³³Additional Conventions of 12 October and 11 December 1871 to the Peace Treaty.



738 documentation which marked the end of their
739 activities.³⁴ This is again quite common to many
740 borders (García-Álvarez and Puente-Lozano
741 2017), although here they have been reduced to
742 the bare minimum.

743 The relationship between communities and/or
744 private individuals was affected by the new
745 border. This resulted in multiple transnational
746 landowners with assets scattered in two countries
747 with different legislations and regulations.
748 A harvest coming from a neighbouring field one
749 day was now an imported asset subject to
750 entrance and exit fees. This is why, in order to
751 facilitate “the exploitation of property and forests
752 near the borders”, a variety of goods produced
753 within a 10 kms radius on either side of the
754 border became free of customs duties.³⁵ The
755 cross-border old roads could be used by their
756 owners under the same conditions as if they were
757 entirely located on the same state’s territory.
758 These provisions were not unheard of: one finds
759 them in all demarcation operations taking place
760 in Europe at the time (Bouisset 2002). Their
761 concrete application allowed municipalities such
762 as Raon-lès-Leau (see above) to supply sawmills
763 with wood coming from neighbouring German
764 territories.

765 Commissioners strived to adapt sovereignty in
766 territorial and exclusive terms to all social and
767 cultural realities they encountered. All jurisdic-
768 tional and ambiguous spaces had to be divided
769 between states so that they became integrated
770 clearly into one or the other (Di Fiore 2017).
771 Article six of the Treaty of Frankfurt had
772 explicitly provided that the diocesan and parish
773 boundaries coincide with the new border. Also,
774 Protestant and Jewish communities that became
775 German were split up from the French consisto-
776 ries. Thus, the demarcation process involved an
777 unexpected actor: the Holy See.³⁶ A French-
778 German diocesan delimitation commission was

779 formed and implemented the pontifical decrees
780 pursuant to the Treaty of Frankfurt: all the par-
781 ishes grouping several municipalities crossed by
782 the border were split up.³⁷ The inhabitants of
783 Ajoncourt and Arraye-et-Han, for example, who
784 were baptised in the same church and who were
785 buried in the same cemetery, were brutally sep-
786 arated by this process. The diocesan delimitation
787 commission followed the demarcation realised
788 by the joint boundary commission.

789 The demarcation of a border can also be an
790 opportunity to reaffirm existing rights, even
791 ancient ones, between communities. The most
792 well-known historical case is the *lies et passeries*
793 agreement between mountain communities in the
794 Pyrenees concerning forestry and grazing laws
795 on both sides of the French-Spanish border,
796 which for some dates back as far as the twelfth
797 century.³⁸ The German municipalities of Pet-
798 toncourt, Moncourt and Deutsch-Avricourt, for
799 example, demanded and received the right to
800 graze on land located in French border towns.³⁹
801 The municipal council of Pettoncourt even
802 unearthed a royal ordinance dated 22 May 1786,
803 logged at the parliament of Metz, to defend this
804 aboriginal right.

805 When the border cut off a road perpendicu-
806 larly, the state exerted its sovereignty up to the
807 point where the delineation ran and deployed
808 customs officers with ease. But when the border
809 cut off a road in its length, the collection of
810 customs fees became an issue, as well as the
811 maintenance of the pavement. Indeed, in this
812 case, the exercise of sovereignty was made dif-
813 ficult since residents and customs officers could
814 switch sovereignty as they pleased, by choosing
815 which side of the road to walk on; the mainte-
816 nance of half of the pavement by each of the
817 states did not make the necessary repairs an easy

³⁴ADBR, 87 AL 581. Minutes of the delimitation between France and the German Empire, 26 April 1877.

³⁵Additional convention to the 10 May 1871 peace treaty between France and Germany, 11 December 1871, article 12.

³⁶Rem in ecclesiastica, pontifical decree of 14 June 1874.

³⁷3 ADP 21. Travaux de la commission mixte pour la délimitation des nouvelles circonscriptions diocésaines 1873–1874.

³⁸The *lies et passeries* in the Pyrenees were renewed by French-Spanish treaties in the nineteenth century, during the demarcation of the border. See Roige et al. (2002).

³⁹AD, 2Q0 204. Minister of the Interior to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 11 May 1875, Minister of Finance to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 5 June 1875.



818 task. Such a situation, which makes everyday life
819 complicated, pushed the mayors of Moncourt
820 and Coincourt to demand, and later obtain, neu-
821 trality for common border roads in terms of
822 customs.⁴⁰ The joint boundary commission
823 established a list of 43 roads and common
824 pathways, totaling 43 kms of delineation, split in
825 length for their maintenance and “made neutral in
826 terms of customs”⁴¹. This meant that residents
827 carrying goods could use the roads without
828 having to pay customs fees, and police officers
829 could travel along these roads uniformed and
830 armed. Each state maintained the stretch of road
831 belonging to the other state, and maintenance
832 costs were equally split.

833 On multiple sections, the border followed a
834 river bed and thus crossed over bridges, some of
835 which had been destroyed or damaged.⁴²
836 Because it was impossible to maintain or rebuild
837 a bridge from one side only, the boundary
838 commission divided the task, with eight bridges
839 for France and nine for the German Empire.
840 Maintenance costs were also split equally, so that
841 none of the states waived their sovereignty over
842 their half of a bridge.⁴³ Thus, the bridge linking
843 Réchésy to Seppois-le-Bas was entirely main-
844 tained by the German administration, but France
845 paid for half of the costs. Furthermore, the
846 commissioners forbid the costs to be paid by a
847 newly introduced toll: residents were thus
848 assured to never have to pay to cross the border
849 via the bridge.

850 Such adjustments made the life of inhabitants
851 and customs officers easier. The two French
852 municipalities of Vaucourt and Xures, linked by a
853 pathway which went through the German munic-
854 ipality of Lagarde, secured their neutrality, having

855 requested it.⁴⁴ For the sake of reciprocity, the same
856 decision was taken for the pathway linking
857 Aboncourt to Bioncourt via the French munic-
858 ipality of Bey. The maintenance of the few metres
859 on foreign soil had to be carried out by the state
860 who made use of it, and maintenance costs were
861 equally split. It was further assumed that local
862 coalitions, led by mayors and councils, aimed to
863 preserve the types of trade and sociability which
864 the border disrupted. For instance, in November
865 1871 the municipalities of Coincourt, Lagarde,
866 Parray, Vaucourt and Xures expressed their wish
867 to receive similar agreements from the commis-
868 sion, and proposed adjustments to the delineation
869 in order for customs duties to be waived.

870 The commissioners were particularly focused
871 on forests near the border, due to their economic
872 and strategic importance as illustrated above.⁴⁵
873 Public and private forestry officers received the
874 responsibility of policing the border. Private
875 landowners carried on compensating their own
876 guards, but they had to be nationals and state
877 certified. In France as in Germany, an extra-
878 ordinary provision with regards to common law
879 enabled the exercising of sovereignty. Local
880 authorities with remaining woodlands on the
881 other side of the border, such as Sancy in the
882 Lommerange area, could request for the neigh-
883 bouring state to have an officer from the forestry
884 administration police the wooded areas. Public
885 landowners had the privilege to further manage
886 their forest properties according to the rules of
887 the dependent country and to let their employees
888 move freely on both sides of the border.

889 With the clear distinction between mainte-
890 nance costs of roads, bridges, etc., the limits of
891 state sovereignty differed from its *exercise*, and
892 that this is a necessary condition for the func-
893 tioning of a border: the joint boundary commis-
894 sion developed a specific sovereignty regime
895 (Agnew 2005). If the *sovereignty* and its *exercise*
896 would be applied for the exact same territory,

⁴⁰AD, 2Q0 204. Minister of the Interior to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 11 May 1875.

⁴¹ADBR, 87 AL 581. Minutes of the delimitation between France and the German Empire, 26 April 1877, article 3.

⁴²ADM, 15 AL 165. Negotiations with France on the topic of border bridges (1874–1914).

⁴³ADBR, 87 AL 581. Minutes of the delimitation between France and the German Empire, 26 April 1877, article 7.

⁴⁴AD, 2Q0 204. Minister of the Interior to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 11 May 1875.

⁴⁵ADBR, 87 AL 581. Minutes of the delimitation between France and the German Empire, 26 April 1877, articles 12 and 13.



897 with no possible adjustment, residents of
898 Foussemagne would have had to pay customs
899 duties six times when using the road to
900 Chavannes-sur-l'Étang; the French and German
901 states would have had to each build three cus-
902 toms offices, one hundred metres apart, at each
903 point where the road crosses over the border
904 delineation. In order to make the border opera-
905 tional, the customs boundary between the two
906 states was moved to a middle point on the cross-
907 border road: one of the few pragmatic adjust-
908 ments, aiming to facilitate the daily life of the
909 populations and state action, but which did not
910 change the border demarcation.

911 4.6 Conclusion

912

913 Between 1871 and 1877, the French-German
914 joint boundary commission demarcated the bor-
915 der delimited by the Treaty of Frankfurt. Faced
916 with diplomats' unfamiliar realities, the com-
917 missioners roamed the new border laying the
918 border stones, which turned an abstraction on
919 paper into a concrete material border. They even
920 were at the origin of delimitation modifications.
921 Beyond the laying of boundary markers, they also
922 sought to enable state sovereignty by making the
923 border efficient, in order to turn it into a long-term
924 and usable boundary, sparing populations the
925 impracticality of repeated border crossings. The
926 location and reading of original sources allow us
927 to restore inhabitants' agency by looking at docu-
928 ments in which they shared their thoughts with
929 the aim to shed light on how much of a disruption
930 the new border was for them. For this reason, the
931 inhabitants of Raon-lès-Leau were remarkable:
932 they fought at all costs to remain French. This
933 case might seem anecdotal, but the amount of
934 petitions, complaints and grievances in the
935 archives is significant. Besides, these documents
936 were considered, assessed and discussed within
937 the demarcation process of the border. Not only
938 did demarcation agents take part in its delineation
939 and operability, but local populations also played
940 an active role. The decisions and actions of the
941 French-German joint boundary commission
942 challenged the argument that commissioners

strictly followed state orders; as García-Álvarez
and Puente-Lozano demonstrated for the Iberian
peninsula borders, instead these decisions created
an institutional space for the circulation of dif-
ferent territorial visions of the border, connecting
different actors and scales implied in the demar-
cation process (García-Álvarez and Puente-
Lozano 2017).

At the end of the 1870s, the green line on a
map had become a reality. The border was
clearly materialised so that no one in France or in
Germany could contest it or pretend ignorance of
its location. All had been planned, from the
maintenance of the boundary markers to the
practical exercise of sovereignty. The joint
boundary commission operations show us that
the production of a border is a long-term, mul-
tiscale, political and social process involving
multiple actors, and cannot be understood as the
drawing of a line on a map. The time elapsed
between delimitation and demarcation (six years)
was extremely fast in comparison with other
European borders. Up until the eve of the First
World War, this border was challenged by
inhabitants and numerous destructions of
boundary markers were recorded. This is why,
Aimé Laussedat, wrote at the turn of the century:
“this border, well or badly drawn, cannot last”
(Laussedat 1902, p. 215). As we know the future
proved him right.

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ADBR	Bas-Rhin local archives (Strasbourg).
ADMM	Meurthe-et-Moselle local archives (Nancy).
ATB	Territoire de Belfort local archives (Belfort).
BA	German federal archives (Berlin).

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