



Marie-Luise Knott

"That was my Beresina"

Producing an international monthly of French origin in German

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What would it take to create a truly European publication? As Marie Luise Knott, editor of the German *Le monde diplomatique*, demonstrates, such a task is far from easy: Newspaper and reading habits are so ingrained in the national mythology of a nation that they do not translate readily into a concept of a "European" newspaper.

The title of my talk, as mysterious as it is, leads straight to the heart of the question which I want to address today: Is our newspaper part, that is indicator, of a European public space? What is our experience and what does it have to do with the creation of a European public space?

The phrase "C'était mon Beresina" was once used in a reportage of the French edition of *Le Monde diplomatique*. The sentence uttered by a social worker in a French shelter for the homeless was that, just a phrase, and somehow, in the French imagination also something bigger: Beresina, that means the defeat of Napoleon's great army in faraway Russia: "C'était mon Beresina" ("That was my Beresina") is untranslatable. What should one write instead? Replace Beresina with German defeats and say: "That was my Stalingrad"? That would be a cruel reversal of the sense since the phrase "C'était mon Beresina" carries the connotations which every French child has learned in school, namely that Napoleon invaded Russia in order to bring universal freedom to the world. Insofar the words of the social worker who by saying "This was my Beresina" capitulates in face of his work in the shelter for the homeless also carry the connotation of – human rights. In the end we translated it as: "That was my defeat" or "I had lost".

The problem I am raising here is a problem that each translator is facing constantly and the example above seems to confirm that language is one of the obstacles on the way to a common European culture, to the creation of a European public space of which there is so much talk (I am not speaking here about the "Republique des lettres", the "Gelehrtenrepublik", since this is, contrary to many beliefs, in the end not a European but an international concept.)

Each state in Europe has its own founding mythology and with it its specific agreement about its inner cohesion and what keeps it together. Over the years, decades and centuries the nation has combined history, literature, art, music etc. and created its specific mythology about itself. As long as the threads of

this myth keep being woven today, the nation remains alive. (Generally, one distinguishes between "thick" and "thin" identities. The criteria for it are, apart from economical and social success, the following questions: How attractive is it to be part of this nation and what expectations for the future does this nation hold? With Germany and France – especially France however – we are obviously speaking about "thick" identities. How attractive, successful and sustainable for the future these states *really* are, is another matter.)

Newspapers, as is commonly known, emerged around the same time as the nation state. And by the way, the first German daily, that was founded by the famous writer Heinrich von Kleist, appeared in Berlin during the French occupation and was vigorously anti-French. Until today a newspaper is the most important forum and tool to convey matters of national interest and matters of national cohesion. In their sum they are part of the sometimes loosely, sometimes tightly woven fabric which each nation produces over the course of time. International news in newspapers are not presented in a vacuum but in the context of the commonly shared self-perception of a country, which also includes peculiarities of speech, presentation of the written word, figurative speech as well as elements of design, all of which are marked through national cultural habits and preferences. Looking at headlines of cultural sections in German dailies you will immediately see how embedded newspapers are into the cultural myth: time and again you will find in them common figures of speech, puns and quotations handed down through the ages remembered through lines from poems, proverbs and from popular songs.

Various European newspaper projects of the recent past (I am thinking here of *liber* and *WorldMedia*) were rather shortlived. The latest European project, the common Europe pages in *El Pais*, *La Repubblica* and *Le Monde* which are placed weekly, will most likely meet the same fate. A bitter disappointment then for the often conjured idea of a European Public Space which the parliamentarian Daniel Cohn Bendit has only recently called for again.

Since *Le Monde diplomatique* has many different national editions, one might be forgiven for thinking that we, all of the editorial boards, somehow represent a part of the European public space or that at least we make an important contribution to its creation. But what we encounter in our daily work, and this is the central thesis that results from our experience, is that there is no space of common intellectual endeavour or memory on which we can rely, call upon or which supports us.

Who are we? *Le Monde diplomatique* was initially a French product and part of the difficult French decolonisation process. In 1954 it was founded as a paper for French speaking diplomats (as of course diplomats were all speaking French, the ancient language of the courts). They were supposed to re-orientate and get rid of their national blinkered visions of the colonial era. Somehow along the way with the emergence of the third world, the readership of the high diplomats got lost, but the intention to create an international newspaper about international politics was kept alive. *Le Monde diplomatique* became the mouthpiece of the anti-colonial liberation movements in the imperial capitals and later the favourite paper of overseas development agencies and their staff. As a French paper it has always focused its attention on the conditions in the former French colonies, alongside with a critical stance towards the politics and development of the United States. Since the beginning of the nineties it has pushed forward the globalisation critique. Not only in its content but also in terms of editing, *Le Monde diplomatique* is an entirely French product: The examples in its more theoretical articles almost

exclusively refer to France, there is a visible preference for French debates and last but not least: the rhetoric used in many of the articles captures the essence and spirit of the elegant and pompous Paris des Hautes Ecoles, which is also where it transports its readers to.

In 1995, six years after the end of the cold war, a process began that appears like a Europeanisation – the newspaper was translated, first into Italy then into German, Spanish, Greek, English and so on. Even Czech and Serbian editions exist today. There are, of course, also Arabic editions (even a Chinese one) but at the centre remain the west European countries and Latin America, which is culturally oriented towards Europe. The central editorial office is still in Paris however, where the newspaper is being produced until today, despite all outwardly appearances of Europeanisation. For us, the respective national editorial offices, their primary aim is to translate the greatest part of the newspaper. Furthermore, the editors of each national edition have to ensure that the paper in the end does justice to the habits and traditions of thought and newspaper traditions of their respective country. In more concrete terms: We take out those articles that are too "French", but since this would leave us with a cheese with too many holes, we are then concerned with introducing our own "colours and patterns" into the paper. This is a difficult venture, no doubt: On the one hand we try to take into account the different interests and reading habits in Germany, on the other hand we attempt again and again to introduce a different international point of view by translating articles from other foreign newspapers like *London Review of Books* or the *New Yorker Three-Penny-Review*. This strategy has proved successful and has been well received by readers: The number of our subscribers rose continually. Though the construct remains fraught with difficulties, one can say: The reader receives an interesting insight into the world. Yet, this is first of all still a bilateral affair.

What are the problems we are facing in concrete terms?

Firstly, the "mother-newspaper" follows, as mentioned above, the interests and habits of the French public. The strength of the French *Le Monde diplomatique* lies in its reports from Africa, Indonesia or the Arab countries – all of which punctuates our own blinkered visions and enriches our media world. A recent dossier that the French initiated on the debate whether headscarves may or may not be worn by students and civil servants, enormously enriched our German debate because it focused on the question of a radical universalism and its consequences that is peculiar to France. In this sense, the paper is a tangible enlargement to our national debates. Add to this the rhetoric of the paper, which, as I mentioned above, has much to do with the self-image of the French: France is a substantial international actor who wants to shape rather than "just" comment on the world. This spirit also imbues our latest project: *The Atlas of Globalisation*, which analyses the state of the world under strategic, political and social points of view. The atlas, which was published shortly before the Iraq war, has proved an enormous success.

Evidently, there are cultural differences that seem less enriching for Germany. The solid anti-Americanism for example, which pervades French society for a number of historical reasons, leads to disconcertment amongst German readers. Other subjects are heavily neglected in France: for example the development in Eastern Europe, environmental policies, the increasing importance and upgrading of international law. Insofar the foreignness of the "mother-paper" is perceived as both – enriching and constricting at the same time.

Secondly, the writers from outside France also have the French public in mind. Although many of the contributors who write for *Le Monde diplomatique* are from different countries – often articles about Germany are produced by German writers – obviously all these writers have their French readership in mind or what they conceive to be the French public space. Which means: German writers avoid German figures of speech and allusions – the very essence of what makes a text lively. On the other hand the French writers do not keep in mind us foreign editors but are writing immediately for the French public. As a result we often ask the German contributors to rewrite their articles for our edition and weave it into our "national" fabric by adding contextual and lingual colour, while we often cut out or rewrite articles about French home affairs. To give you a funny example on how France appropriates the world for itself: The film *Goodbye, Lenin!* was received in France with wide acclaim, however less with regard to the foreign history – that of Eastern Germany – but more in terms of their own cultural malaise, caused by the disappearance of more and more French products from their own supermarket shelves.

Thirdly, the copyright of articles and pictures is still organised within a national framework. In accordance with their national newspaper- and bookmarket many of the internationally acclaimed writers have their own agents and often also their publishing houses in the respective countries for their translations. When an author such as John Berger, Ryszard Kapuszinski or Jorge Semprun publishes an article with the French edition of *Le Monde diplomatique*, it can well happen that we can not publish this contribution, either because it has already appeared in our country or because the German agent demands royalties which we cannot afford. Also, we have of course already paid the general rights for the German edition of *Le Monde diplomatique*.

What do we now do with these three factors?

As mentioned before, we add articles, especially those dealing with Germany, Eastern Europe and with questions pertaining to international law. In 2003 for example we portrayed in ten consecutive editions the ten accession countries and in our April edition this year we printed a long reportage from Saakaschwili's new Georgia. International criminal law is of low interest to the French and therefore we have repeatedly reported on the ad-hoc criminal courts in Rwanda and The Hague as well as on the inauguration of the International Criminal Court in Rome.

More importantly: We tie the paper into the cultural and political context of our own country. This is done through editorial interventions but especially by changing the headlines and introductions of each article or by adding special boxes that provide our readers with references to German debates or with additional information, figures and facts. Let's take an example: The French *Le Monde diplomatique* publishes an article on the congestion on French roads due to the increase in lorries caused by the growing trade within Europe. Deciding to keep it in, since it seems interesting enough, we may cut it a bit and add a box with information for instance on traffic policies in Germany. Or another example: An article on the situation of women in French prisons is supplemented with figures of female prison populations from other countries, amongst them Germany.

Finally: The use of pictures that we choose for our paper follows our own visual tradition and traditions of newspapers–layout and of course our personal

preferences.

In all this we try to follow obviously the model which the American–English writer T.S Eliot devised in the twenties: As publisher of the London–based literary journal *Criterion*, he created a network with various other European journals in Europe (amongst them *Nouvelle Revue Francaise*, *Neue Rundschau*, *Revista del Occidente*) "to make possible the ideas of circulation of ideas whilst they are still fresh". At the time this idea was necessarily confined to Europe due to traffic– and postal constraints. Towards the end of the Second World War and afterwards, the idea of European unification was considered as a serious option by important political movements on the left and the right for a short period of time – in Poland, Italy, France and Germany important groups and personalities called for the foundation of the United States of Europe. However nothing came of it. Instead the nation states were restored and it was the economy which then pushed forward the unification of Europe. To show you how strongly the idea of Europe was felt even on the political right, I'd like to quote to you from a small book from T.S Eliot, which was published, despite the general scarcity of paper, in Germany in 1946. *The Unity of European Culture*. In this book, T.S Eliot emphasised once again that "in any such periodical of course, there must be a lot that will be of interest only to readers of that own nation and language. But their co–operation should continually stimulate the circulation of thought and sensibility between nations in Europe, which fertilises and renovates from abroad the literature of each of nation."

Today, communication techniques have improved and that crucial element, what tied Europe together, and of which Eliot spoke, namely Christianity, does not possess the strength it once had.

So, to conclude, we must from our experience say that – unfortunately or not – there is no "thick" European identity yet. But what remains is the fact that although the different national cultures still are indeed different from each other and even foreign to each other, they do influence each other enormously – wherever they meet and communicate. This is the case also for *Le Monde diplomatique*. The existing national fabrics (to which copyright aspects also belong) are plenty, and they are dense. We are part of them. Clearly, there is a lively exchange taking place in people's heads; we all know to what extent poetry, philosophy, art and science *are* fundamentally this exchange. However, a Europe–wide public space into which the accession countries could integrate does not exist. Rather, Europe seems to remain a project of common markets and common demarcations – first and foremost against the United States and against Islam. The web of the international editorial offices of *Le Monde diplomatique* is insofar very typical for the state Europe is in actually: We publish Europe–wide and the rules of the game (such as licence fees) apply to the whole of Europe, but the relations are by and large bilateral – and France is the centre.

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