

Over de streep : grensarbeid vanuit Zuid-Limburg naar Duitsland, 1958-2001

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Crossing the line

Commuting from South-Limburg (NL) to Germany, 1958-2001

This study examines the relation between a border and a flow of commuters crossing it against the background of the post-war European integration process. Cross-border commuting is the phenomenon of people living in one country and having a job in another, while returning home on a daily or weekly basis. It unites two key 'European' ambitions. First of all, it is related to the pursuit of the free movement of persons, which is one of the basic principles of European integration. Together with the free movement of goods, services and capital, this is one of 'the four freedoms' that were already mentioned as vital for realising an internal market in the Treaty of Rome. Cross-border labour mobility is considered to contribute to an optimal allocation of labour as a production factor and to improve the living and working conditions of individual citizens. Above that, it is seen as integration 'from below', as it involves contacts between Europeans in everyday situations. In the early 1990s the integration process gained momentum with the Maastricht Treaty and the establishment of the Single Market. With the achievement of the internal market, border-related obstacles to the four freedoms were supposed to be removed. This led to phrases like 'Europe without borders'. The implementation of the Schengen Treaty in 1995 (and later its incorporation into the European *acquis communautaire*) completed the 'borderless Europe'.

Secondly, cross-border commuting, which usually takes place in the direct vicinity of borders, is linked with the current aim of encouraging cross-border interaction and integration in European border regions. The establishment of the Single Market threw another light on border regions. Whereas before they were mostly thought of as less-developed peripheries, they have come to be seen as regions full of potential and as 'laboratories of European integration', the places where 'Europe' should first take shape. In the early 1990s, the European Commission launched the so-called INTERREG-initiative offering financial support to cross-border initiatives. This elicited an explosive growth in the number of so-called *Euregios*, cross-border organisations in which separate regional authorities cooperate with the goals of stimulating cross-border interaction in and the development of the border region they are part of. While only a handful *Euregios* existed before the introduction of INTERREG, nowadays they form a network spanning all EU borders.

In the past decades, all kinds of measures have been taken to facilitate and promote European cross-border labour mobility and more specifically, commuting across borders. Most were intended to abolish borders as institutional and informational barriers. Yet, the number of cross-border commuters in Europe has remained marginal ever since the middle of the 1970s. In spite of all efforts, at the turn of the twentieth century the European labour market was predominantly characterised by immobility. The question now is if the number of cross-border commuters has always been this low and if this has been the case everywhere.

This research concerns a long-term analysis of one specific European commuting flow,

that from Dutch South-Limburg to Germany from 1958 until 2001. Its relation to the Dutch-German border is studied from three angles: from a regional socio-economic and socio-political viewpoint, and from the perspective of the cross-border labourers. Thus, not only the quantitative development of commuting to Germany and the way it was embedded in the socio-economic context are considered, but also its meanings in the regional public sphere of (South-)Limburg¹ and for the commuters themselves. This also sheds light on the significance of the border for daily life in this region. South-Limburg is considered to be the scene of numerous cross-border contacts of old. It has been a part of one of the oldest Euregios, the Euregio Meuse-Rhine (EMR), ever since its beginning in 1976 and should hence be one of the breeding grounds of European integration.²

It has to be mentioned here that in this study, work is not only considered to be an economic phenomenon. It is also a way of participating in social life and it has a symbolic meaning. Furthermore, it is important to note that borders are always janus-faced. On the one hand, they are division lines, demarcating states' territories. On the other hand, they are lines of contact between states, because no matter how closed a border is officially, there is always a certain degree of cross-border exchange and mobility, be it of information, goods, money and/or people. It is even argued that because they are division lines, borders mark off uneven (e.g. economic) developments, which can make it attractive to cross them and thus turn them into lines of connection, the so-called *border paradox*. The tension between their separating and connecting qualities and the way it works out is highly changeable in time. Commuters are considered to embody this tension as they constantly move back and forth between two countries. They cross the border in order to go to work and retrace their steps at the end of the day, returning to their country of residence.

Although the dynamic and ambiguous character of borders makes them fascinating research topics, they have long been in the margins of academic attention. In the constellation of intensifying globalisation and European integration and the fall of the Iron Curtain, this has changed and borders have become a core interest for many scholars. Chapter 2 describes recent academic insights regarding borders, border regions and cross-border labour, which form the starting point of this study. Drawing on the literature in the growing and increasingly interdisciplinary field of border studies, a political-material and a socio-cultural dimension of borders are distinguished. Borders are not only territorial and administrative division lines, but also have social and symbolic significance. Although both dimensions are inextricably intertwined, they do not necessarily coincide. Whereas a border may be relatively porous in its politico-material dimension, in its socio-cultural dimension it can be impermeable, and the other way around. Daily life in border regions is characterised by a combination of 'bordered' and border transcending practices, orientations and identities. Cross-border commuters are considered to be borderline cases, as they pre-eminently personify this ambivalence. Their practices are closely associated with both dimensions of borders, as cross-border commuting entails a physical border crossing and not only a close encounter with the institutional set-up of another country, but also its population. Scholars working on cross-border

¹ This part of the research is based on an analysis of articles, which appeared in regional newspapers covering the whole province of Limburg. It is therefore not always possible to speak only of *South-Limburg*.

² The EMR is further composed of the Aachen Region and the Belgian provinces of Liege and Limburg and the German-speaking Community.

commuting have predominantly concentrated on measuring the number of commuters and explaining it by analysing socio-economic and institutional push- and pull-factors. Since it has proven impossible to explain the currently very low number of cross-border labourers in Europe from this perspective, attention has recently shifted to socio-cultural factors explaining the immobility of the vast majority of the European labour force. This study combines both approaches and, unlike most other studies, puts them in a long-term perspective. Furthermore, this study adds to the field of border studies by also analysing the meanings of cross-border commuting at the regional and the individual level. The appraisal of cross-border labour in the regional public sphere is linked with the (desired) relationship between the border region and the state it is part of, which also involves a certain concept of the border. The experiences of cross-border labourers elucidate the significance of the border in their practices and perceptions and the way this developed during and, when applicable, after their career in Germany.

Besides the theoretical framework, Chapter 2 discusses the methods used to study the above-mentioned issues. These consist of an analysis of aggregated statistics regarding cross-border labour to Germany and existing studies on cross-border commuting and socio-economic developments on both sides of the border. Articles from regional newspapers were used to gain insight into the evaluation of commuting to Germany in the regional public sphere. Finally, cross-border commuters were interviewed about their personal experiences with working in Germany.

Before setting out with the empirical part of the study, Chapter 3 further introduces the case it focuses on. It starts out with a description of the way South-Limburg's position in the Netherlands has evolved by focussing on the integration of the province of Limburg in the Dutch nation-state. This was not without problems and in this process, Limburg developed a strong regional identity. Next to that, literature on cross-border labour from South-Limburg to Germany is discussed. In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, many people from Limburg worked in Germany, for instance as seasonal labourers in brickfields. Although there are some quantitative short-term studies on the post-war development of cross-border commuting to Germany, so far no real in-depth and long-term research has been done on its evolution during this period, let alone its meanings at the regional level and at the individual level of the commuters themselves.

The empirical part of this dissertation consists of three chapters. Chapter 4 deals with the development of the size and composition of the commuting flow from South-Limburg to Germany between 1958 and 2001 and its relation with the Dutch-German border. Two periods are discerned in which the labour flow displayed a highly different evolution: firstly, the late 1950s until the late 1970s and secondly, the 1980s until 2001. During the first period, the number of cross-border labourers fluctuated heavily and reached the rather high level of almost 17,000 commuters in 1973. This happened against a background of exceptional socio-economic divergences between the industrial labour markets on both sides of the border. The Dutch side of the border was suffering from problems among and the eventual disappearance of its main employers, twelve coal mines. At the same time, the German side of the border was experiencing economic growth, implying a huge demand for labour and high wages. Under these circumstances it was very attractive to start commuting. The quantitative divergence went hand in hand with a noticeable qualitative match. The supply of blue collar workers in South-Limburg fit excellently with the demand for labourers in the German border region.

Most commuters were males (often former miners) working in construction or the metal industry. Yet, in spite of the favourable circumstances on the German side and difficulties on the Dutch side of the border, the majority of the South-Limburg labour force was kept from (considering) working in Germany. After 1973, a period of economic crises set in on both the Dutch and the German sides of the border and the number of commuters dropped to less than 7,000 in 1979.

In the second period, the number of commuters showed a much more stable development, retaining a low level of about 6,000 to 8,000 workers. The number of cross-border labourers was even smaller when the high number of German migrants who moved to South-Limburg while keeping their jobs in Germany, is taken into account. Socio-economically, both sides of the border demonstrated a comparable development. They witnessed the deepening economic crisis in the 1980s and a restructuring of the labour market. Gradually, the service sector grew, whereas the industrial sector experienced a loss of jobs. Due to the parallel labour market developments on both sides of the border, the reason to work across the border largely disappeared. Moreover, the supply of labourers on the Dutch side no longer matched with the demand on the German side of the border. In a time of both more quantitative similarities and qualitative inequalities in terms of supply of and demand for labour, cross-border commuting thus remained a rather marginal phenomenon.

In both periods, the border was of vital importance for the development of the commuting flow. As a political-material division line, the border marked differences in socio-economic policy. In the 1960s and 1970s, these caused uneven developments, which stimulated cross-border labour. The border hence played the paradoxical role mentioned earlier: exactly because it was a division line between labour markets on the German and the Dutch side of the border, it also connected both of them. In the 1980s and 1990s, the parallel quantitative development and restructuring of the labour markets on both sides of the border went together with a growing significance of border-related institutional obstacles for cross-border labour mobility, like dissimilar educational systems. Furthermore, it is argued that during the whole research period, in its socio-cultural sense, the border mainly seems to have hindered cross-border commuting. For the majority of the South-Limburg labour force, the German labour market appears to have been a blind spot when looking for work. In other words, a *threshold of indifference* seems to have restrained them from even considering commuting.

In Chapter 5 attention shifts to the way cross-border commuting was interpreted in the public sphere of (South-)Limburg and the ways this was related to the Dutch-German border. It is asserted that in regional press, commuting was mostly dealt with in a normative way. During the whole research period, articles kept referring to 'the commuting problem'. Even though the term suggests otherwise, it usually had several meanings at the same time and, more importantly, did not always imply criticism of commuting. Again, two periods are distinguished: the late 1950s until the late 1970s, when commuting was disapproved of, and the late 1970s until 2001, when it was generally accepted and later also welcomed. These roughly coincide with the periods that were discerned in the quantitative development of the commuting flow. The (dis)agreement with commuting contrasted sharply with the number of commuters. It took place on a large scale in the years that it was condemned, while there were hardly any commuters in the years when it was accepted.

In the first period, cross-border commuting was generally regarded as undesirable. 'The commuting problem' was threefold. Dutch employers' and employees' organisations, and

Limburg authorities, politicians and journalists contended that it had negative effects on the Dutch national economy, commuters' personal lives and, most importantly, the South-Limburg labour market. Harmonisation of Dutch and German social and fiscal legislation was seen as the best way to reduce the number of commuters. So by erasing the border in its institutional sense, it was thought that it would come to function more as a barrier towards the German labour market.

In the second period, the evaluation of commuting to Germany changed to agreement. This happened in two steps, which also involved a redefinition of 'the commuting problem' in two ways. Until the 1990s, almost every article reported on problems commuters were facing due to discrepancies between Dutch and German social and fiscal laws and regulations. Interestingly, Dutch politicians and trade unions, who at first mostly denounced commuting, now stood up for the commuters. Additionally, representatives of an interest group of cross-border labourers often directed media attention to the difficult position commuters were in. Gone were the accounts in which cross-border commuting was objected to. This is considered symptomatic of an acceptance of commuting as such. It is demonstrated that in the 1990s, commuting also had a positive connotation. The idea that the low number of cross-border commuters hampered regional development now came to be added to the definition of 'the commuting problem'. In other words, cross-border commuting came to be seen as a contribution to the advance of South-Limburg. Still, harmonisation of social and tax laws and thus partly erasing the border in its institutional sense, was considered to be the best solution to 'the commuting problem'. Contrary to the previous two decades, it was now seen as the best way to eliminate the problems and thereby facilitate and stimulate commuting.

Although most newspaper reports dealt with the political-material dimension of the border, it is argued that the socio-cultural dimension was undeniably present as well. The socio-cultural dimension of the border hid in the frames of reference in which commuting was interpreted, for the judgments were closely related to the conception of South-Limburg as a border region and its (preferred) relation with the Dutch state. This also implied a certain desired degree of openness of the border. In the first period, (South-)Limburg was first and foremost considered a peripheral, but integral part of the Dutch state, which should be able to develop independently from its surrounding countries. Regional interests were defined within a nationally bordered frame of reference. Cross-border labour was subject to fierce criticism as it entailed dependence on Germany. Since the late 1970s, the interdependent relation with neighbouring countries, which went hand in hand with cross-border commuting, was first accepted and later also welcomed. In the 1990s, South-Limburg came to be approached as part of the Euregio Meuse-Rhine as a central European region that would profit from cross-border labour mobility. From a de-bordered frame of reference, the border was now considered to curb cross-border commuting and at the same time regional development.

The last empirical chapter of this book, Chapter 6, is based on interviews with (former) cross-border workers and elaborates on their experiences with working in Germany in relation to the border. In tracing the routes commuters followed two points are made. Firstly, unlike the development of the size and composition of the commuting flow and the way it was evaluated in the regional public sphere, commuters' experiences could not be divided into clearly defined historical periods. This does not mean that there were not any changes in time however. Secondly, it is argued that in several ways the border was of paradoxical significance in relation to commuters' experiences.

First of all, the character of the relation between commuting to Germany and the border changed over time. In its political-material sense, the border got new meanings. It is described how, as a physical and an institutional division line, the significance of the border changed both historically as well as in the paths commuters walked. Historically speaking, the border almost disappeared as a physical division line. Over the years, border markers and border controls were gradually abolished. As an institutional line of separation however, the border gained meaning once the commuters had started working in Germany, and the significance of this also seems to have grown historically. Cross-border workers were confronted with all kinds of, mostly unforeseen, incongruities between Dutch and German laws and regulations, which created a sense of insecurity and sometimes had serious financial consequences. Even after they had ended their careers in Germany, the border as an institutional division line could still draw a line through their lives.

Next to that, it is demonstrated that in its socio-cultural dimension the Dutch-German border exhibited much more stability, both historically and in the routes the cross-border labourers followed. Before commuters started commuting, the so-called *threshold of indifference* often kept them from regarding work in Germany an option. Information coming from people in their informal social networks proved crucial to overcoming this mental barrier. Nevertheless, after taking the step of accepting work in Germany, a certain degree of insecurity and reservations persisted among commuters. From a bordered frame of reference, they saw Germany as different, which led to uncertainty. After a while, commuters gradually felt at home and insecurities subsided. This also meant that they came to experience a sense of alienation from the Netherlands. The functioning of the border as a barrier was thereby reversed. Commuters' intermediary position found profound expression in the simultaneous settling down in Germany and alienation from the Netherlands. They came to feel like *fremdkörper*, feeling at home on neither side of the border. Their in-between position also displayed itself in an ambiguous identity. Most commuters clearly had a strong regional identity. When referring to this, they often referred to commonalities between the population of Limburg and Germans, which they had noted while working in Germany. Yet, the border remained a rather clear socio-cultural division line. Although commuters usually characterised contacts with German colleagues as good, they clearly distinguished from them in the interview by using all kinds of 'Dutch' stereotypes when referring to the Germans and distancing themselves from them as Dutch. This ambivalent identity, both bordered and de-bordered, is typical for border people.

In the second place, generally speaking, the border had a rather paradoxical meaning for the commuters in several ways. Firstly, the earlier mentioned border paradox was at work, as commuters crossed the border because of the socio-economic disparities it marked. Based on commuters' experiences, two more paradoxes can be added to this. One paradox is that precisely because commuters transcended the border on the labour market, it gained meaning in their daily lives as they felt confronted with the border as a division line. This was not only related to evident national disparities, like distinct languages and laws and regulations, but also to other things, like their German colleagues' attitudes. Even though the experienced dissimilarities were not always indisputably nationally determined, from a bordered frame of reference commuters primarily attributed them to the different national context. Another paradox is that, articulating a Dutch identity and in this way reproducing the border as a symbolic division line, did not necessarily hamper social contacts with Germans. On the contrary, in a social sense the border could become a line of connection because national identity and stereo-

types offered a common frame of reference, which opened up opportunities for contact. Nonetheless, cross-border social relations usually remained fairly limited.

In Chapter 7, the results of studying the relation between cross-border commuting from South-Limburg to Germany from the three above-mentioned points of view are discussed and compared. They are shown to coincide with and complement each other, but also to differ from one another. Cross-border commuting and borders are multidimensional, ambiguous and changeable phenomena. Studying them in a differentiated and dynamic way precludes limited or distorted images of their mutual relation. This does not only go for academic research on cross-border labour and borders, but also for the way they are dealt with in practice. Generally speaking, although current measures to reduce the significance of the border as a political-material division line by tackling institutional discrepancies and information deficits, are very useful for those already working across borders, they will not get many currently immobile border people going. A mental threshold often keeps them from taking neighbouring countries' labour markets into account when looking for a job. This also goes for the population of Dutch South-Limburg. Besides, it has been demonstrated that the disparities marked by borders do not necessarily only hinder cross-border labour mobility, but can actually also stimulate it. Therefore, policies promoting convergence in order to increase cross-border work run the risk of actually diminishing the number of cross-border commuters. Furthermore, on the regional level, the goal of stimulating labour mobility across borders has been shown to not always find a fertile breeding ground in border areas. On an individual level, expectations regarding the withering of the border once it is crossed on the labour market have to be moderated. Whereas cross-border commuters to Germany transcended the border, they also felt more strongly confronted with it, reproduced it and could change its meanings. All in all, albeit in various and changeable ways, the Dutch-German border was of great significance in relation to commuting from South-Limburg to Germany, even though slogans such as 'Europe without borders' seem to suggest otherwise.