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► **To cite this version:**

Estelle Bunout. Visualisation of the prosopography of Polish and German experts on Eastern Europe: Are non-computed data useable for visualisation?. DH Benelux conference 2016, 2016, Esch sur Alzette, Luxembourg. 2016, <http://www.dhbenelux.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/63_BunoutEstelle_FinalAbstract_DHBenelux2016_long.pdf>. <hal-01562569>

HAL Id: hal-01562569

<https://hal.univ-lorraine.fr/hal-01562569>

Submitted on 31 Jul 2017

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Visualisation of the prosopography of Polish and German experts on Eastern Europe: Are non-computed data useable for visualisation?

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What qualifies an expert? In the area of Eastern European history, how does this expert's own experience of his (more rarely her) area of expertise affect that qualification? Taking into account the historical context, what is the connection in his or her life between Eastern Europe and violence: was it a place where he or she suffered from violence, or did he or she exert violence there? Is the experience of violence reflected in his or her expertise? If so, how — and, more importantly, when? Taking the individual backgrounds of experts in Poland and Germany who lived through World War II, I set out to compare the impact the war had on their lives and the disruption and continuity in their acquisition and praxis of expertise. For this research, I focused on 3 institutions providing expertise on foreign relations in Poland, West and East Germany, from which I selected the experts working on issues related to Eastern Europe, in the fields of security, history and law.

Facing a very diverse and rich corpus, I developed an analytical tool in the form of a visualisation that would provide me with an overview of the biographical data and the intellectual production of the experts I was observing. The result is a conceptual model that shows side by side the evolution of the expertise and the experience of the expert.

Since the visualisation lies in the schematisation of data that are partially given (e.g. date of birth), and others that are partially built (experience of violence), one can ask how the visualisation of biographical trajectories and intellectual production can be used as a heuristic and communication tool for the researcher; or what is the use of drawing non-computed data?

According to Jacques Bertin (Bertin 1981), a graphic theorist, the visualisation of data should make a multiplicity of data readable to humans. The data should be organised in such a way as to present relationships between elements of data and provide the reader with answers on those relationships. The visualisation is fully integrated in the iteration process of the research. In an effort to synthesise my corpus, I build two pillars: one for the biographical trajectory and one for intellectual development. The first used the biographical data: date of birth and death, career stages, etc. The second looked at intellectual production: books, articles, etc.

Here we have examples of biographical trajectories, showing the carrier steps of three German experts, with their academic experience in green, their journalistic one in purple and their military one in red. The experience of violence is represented with wavy lines; parallel when the violence is endured, reversed when exerted. The dotted lines represent professional instability. Here at one glance, one can see the impact the war had on their careers, in terms of mobility and violence experience or practice.

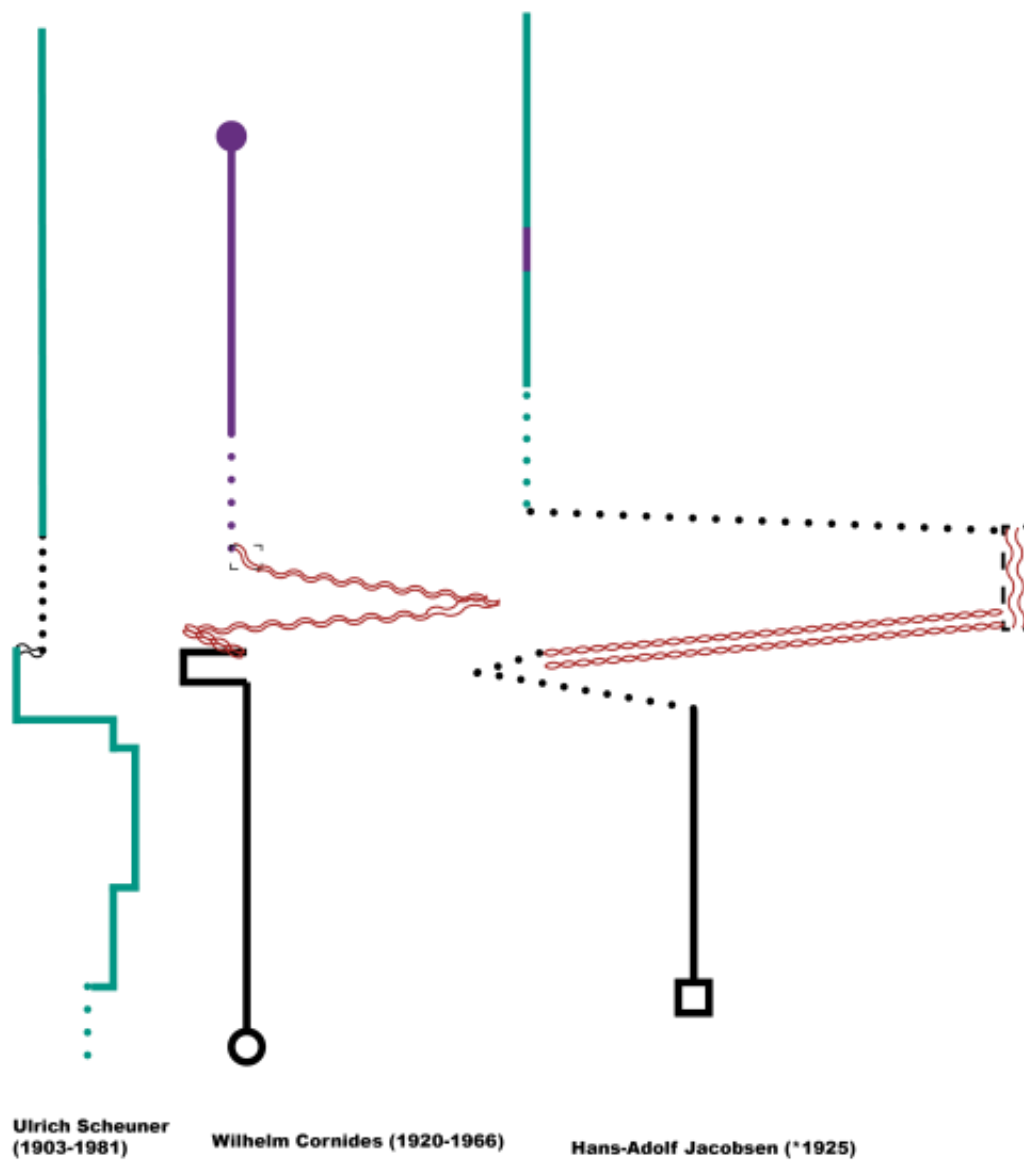


Figure 1: the biographical paths of three experts: U. Scheuner, W. Cornides, H-A Jacobsen.

A space and timeframe was defined to encompass the movements of the experts in their area of expertise, since one goal of this study was to root the expertise in the materiality of its subject: Eastern Europe, its languages, its inhabitants. This region has seen many changes in the 20th century, particularly in terms of its borders. Representing this area by superimposing the data on top of a traditional geographical map would have rendered the experts' individual trajectories difficult to read. Therefore a new alternative type of representation was developed, inspired by timelines, adapted to the needs of this study: it shows the scale of West–East movements made by the experts under analysis. On this basis, their progression can be plotted over time and between those two compass points.

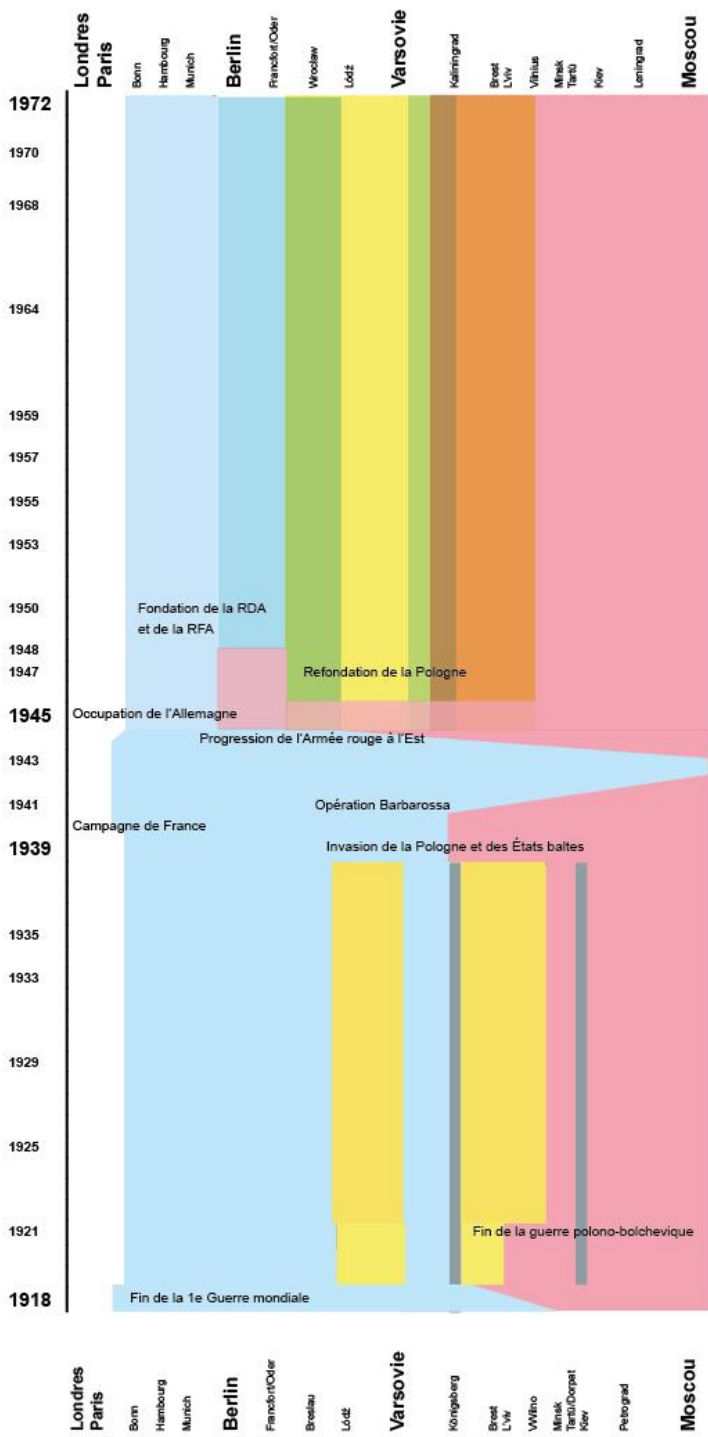


Figure 2: chronological map for the biographical paths (1918-1972)

The visualisation constitutes a simplified framework that can be used to structure the issues at hand and obtain an overview of the available selected data and highlight what data are missing, in a biography. In this case, I lack the information on how and when Boris Meissner came back from being prisoner of war in the Soviet-Union.

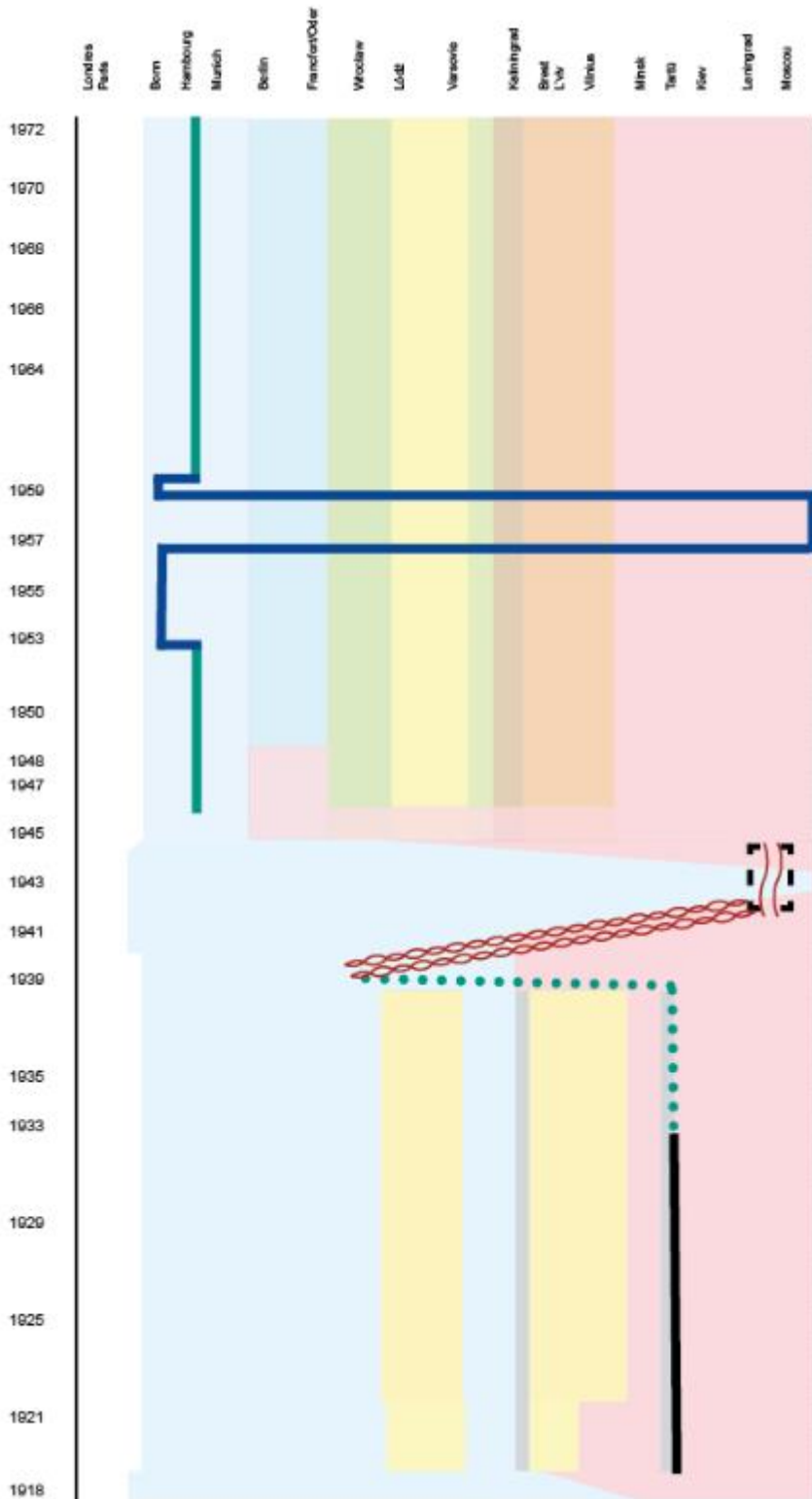


Figure 3: Missing data: the biographical path of Boris Meissner (1915-2003)

The second pillar of the visualisation focuses on the intellectual production of the selected experts. If we understand expertise as a discourse using knowledge, rooted in the personal credibility of the expert, to push some political conception, several elements can be examined in order to analyse its evolution — especially given the strong political instrumental use of that area of expertise in Poland and Germany before and after WWII. I assigned a symbol to each ‘conception’ put forward by the expert for Eastern Europe or for bilateral relations with Eastern Europe. It is then linked to the sources he or she used to make his or her point.

For instance, in an article one expert uses Russian sources to argue for conquest of parts of the Soviet Union, and later uses Polish and German source to argue for the legitimacy of the new borders. This helps us define a typology of practices that we can easily compare across the languages of the publications and time.

Stanisław Zabiello (1902-1970)

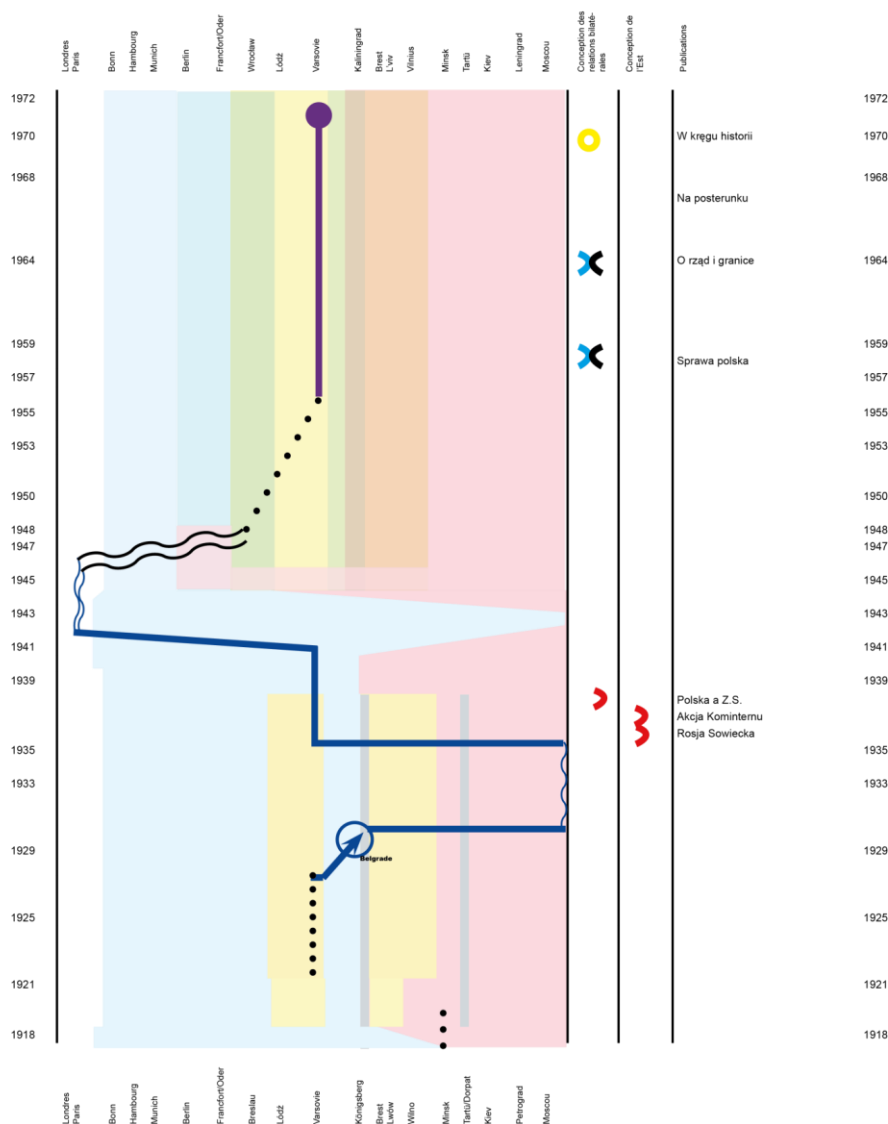


Figure 4: A Polish expert's profile: Stanisław Zabiello (1902-1970) through his experience of Eastern Europe and his books

The visualisation of complex graphics helps us compare biographical trajectories and intellectual productions in German and Polish on the same visual background. As the represented elements are very explicitly constructed, the visualisation process is a way of bringing transparency to the methodology used: how are the typologies defined and what are the sources used for this visualisation? What elements are represented and what elements did I choose not to represent (nationalities, some border changes)?

I would argue that the visualisation of 'artisanal' data, inspired by the digital tools and methodology, helps our research in humanities to organise our complex data, building up from our research product. In this case, we paraphrase timelines and diagrams to build a profile in silhouette of the observed experts, to support our analysis of experts' practices and their evolution.

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