

Navid Kermani's *Entlang den Gräben* and Its Readers: Remapping Europe's East

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In 2016, German-Iranian writer Navid Kermani set off on a journey east: a journey across space, but also across cultural representations of that space. The resulting travelogue, *Entlang den Gräben: Eine Reise durch das östliche Europa bis nach Isfahan* (2018, *Along the Trenches: A Journey through Eastern Europe to Isfahan*, 2020), can be read as an attempt to remap the east of Europe with an eye to changing how it is commonly perceived both in Germany, and in Western Europe more generally. Like many of Kermani's earlier works, *Entlang den Gräben* sold very well in Germany, was widely reviewed in the media, and was promoted on an extensive book tour. But how successful has the book been at influencing the perceptions of its readers? In this essay, I place *Entlang den Gräben* in the context of the broader role that the east of Europe has played in the German cultural imaginary. I also analyze Kermani's unusual and original intervention into this discourse achieved through his self-reflexive positioning as a historical subject, as well as his selective use of tropes familiar from older German visions of the east of Europe and his strategic deployment of a variety of tropes and cultural intertexts. Last but not least, I consider his book's reception in Germany and beyond. Since the focus is on representations of space, I pay special attention to the book's paratextual material, which includes maps and photographs. These paratexts have interesting counterparts in Kermani's thirteen-part travel reportage published in *Der Spiegel* in 2016 and 2017, which gave rise to *Entlang den Gräben*, and the book's English translation—the only one that has appeared to date.¹ While the extent of Kermani's authorial

¹ Navid Kermani, *Along the Trenches: A Journey through Eastern Europe to Isfahan*, trans. Tony Crawford (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

control over these paratexts is unclear, they play a crucial role as the first indication of the nature of his project for the book's readers.

The vast majority of scholarship on Kermani to date has focused on the topic of Islam and migration in Germany, and with good reason.² His upbringing as a son of Iranian immigrants and his profound engagement with various schools of Islamic theology are clearly central elements in his works. In Joseph Twist's words, Kermani's writing "evoke[s] a skeptical and mystical Islam in order to convey a cosmopolitan sense of openness toward others and undermine the stable and coherent sense of self that [can be viewed] as contributing to identity conflict."³ This "cosmopolitan sense of openness toward others," grounded in Islamic theology, permeates Kermani's writing even when he is not explicitly

² One notable exception is Claudia Breger's chapter "*Einbruch der Wirklichkeit* (Incursion of Reality): Navid Kermani's Engaged Realism," in *Protest und Verweigerung / Protest and Refusal: Neue Tendenzen in der deutschen Literatur seit 1989 / New Trends in German Literature since 1989*, ed. Hans Adler and Sonja E. Klocke (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2019), 23–43, which discusses Kermani as a contemporary participant in a long debate about committed literature alongside Sartre, Adorno, and more recently Latour, with mentions of Brecht, Camus, and Lukacs as well.

³ Joseph Twist, *Mystical Islam and Cosmopolitanism in Contemporary German Literature: Openness to Alterity* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2018), 139. For other valuable discussions of Islam and migration in Kermani's writing, see articles collected in Michael Hofmann, Klaus von Stosch, and Swen Schulte Eickholt, eds., *Navid Kermani* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2019), Torsten Hoffmann, ed., *Navid Kermani, text + kritik* 217 (2018), and Helga Druxes, Karolin Machtans, and Alexandar Mihailovic, eds., *Navid Kermani* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016).

discussing Islam or migration. However, the extraordinary emphasis placed on these themes in Kermani's critical and popular reception means that much remains to be written on his engagement with other topics. While his personal and intellectual interest in Islam and migration is not absent from *Entlang den Gräben*, its main focus is clearly different, and the book offers an opportunity to engage in a more wide-ranging discussion of Kermani's work.

How to begin to understand Kermani's project in *Entlang den Gräben*? A useful starting point is to consider other German-language books about the east of Europe that Kermani lines up as reference points in his narrative. In describing his travels in the east of Europe, he presents himself as a prodigious reader of history books, cultural criticism, as well as various novels. If his own readers were to follow up on his reading material, they would discover that one of the novels he introduces in *Entlang den Gräben* begins with a geography lesson in which the question of boundaries, of the geographical reach of the east of Europe, is left open. A teacher tells his students: “‘Im Norden, Süden und Westen ist Europa von Meeren umgeben. Das Nördliche Polarmeer, das Mittelmeer und der Atlantische Ozean bilden die natürlichen Grenzen dieses Kontinents. ... Die Ostgrenze Europas zieht sich durch das Russische Kaiserreich den Ural entlang, durchschneidet das Kaspische Meer und läuft dann durch Transkaukasien. Hier hat die Wissenschaft ihr letztes Wort noch nicht gesprochen.’”⁴ Those are the opening sentences of *Ali und Nino*, a novel about an intercultural love story between the titular characters first published in German in Vienna in 1937, under the pseudonym Kurban Said. The identity of the author of the novel is still disputed, but he is widely assumed to be Lev Nussimbaum (1905–42). Raised in Baku, Nussimbaum later emigrated to Berlin, where he converted from Judaism to Islam and was

⁴ Kurban Said, *Ali und Nino* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2019), 5.

active as a successful journalist and writer under yet another pseudonym—Essad Bey.⁵ *Ali und Nino*, his most famous book, is set in the Caucasus in the late 1910s, and chronicles a stormy period in the history of the region, characterized by the coexistence of ancient Islamic and Christian traditions, the advent of European modernity in the wake of the discovery of vast oil reserves in Baku, and the specter of the Bolshevik revolution. Both Nussimbaum's complex authorial persona and the plot of his novel—as its first sentences already signal—highlight the complexity of cultural belonging.

Kermani's choice to discuss *Ali und Nino* in *Entlang den Gräben* reinforces two interrelated questions that are at the heart of his own book. First, where does the eastern border of Europe lie? And second, how can we disrupt traditional narratives about the location of German culture? As he travels—and reads his way—across Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, Kermani finds it “berührend zu sehen, ... daß in allen drei Ländern des Transkaukasus so etwas wie ein moderner Nationalroman von einem Schriftsteller deutscher Sprache und jüdischer Herkunft verfaßt worden ist.”⁶ These three novels are *Ali und Nino* in Azerbaijan, Franz Werfel's *Die vierzig Tage des Musa Dagh* (1933, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, 2012) in Armenia, and Givi Margvelashvili's *Kapitän Wakusch* (1991, *Captain Vakush*) in Georgia. Despite being written in German by an Austrian-Bohemian author, Werfel's thousand-page long novel—his best-known work—is one of the most famous

⁵ See Tom Reiss, *The Orientalist: In Search of a Man Caught between East and West* (London: Vintage, 2005) and Carl Niekerk and Cori Crane, eds., *Approaches to Kurban Said's Ali and Nino: Love, Identity, and Intercultural Conflict* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2017).

⁶ Navid Kermani, *Entlang den Gräben: Eine Reise durch das östliche Europa bis nach Isfahan* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2018), 294.

literary portrayals of the Armenian Genocide during World War I and the local resistance against it. Margvelashvili was born in 1927 in Berlin to Georgian parents, and his autobiographical novel chronicles his life between Germany and Georgia, marked by the horrors of twentieth-century history. Kermani's choice to highlight these three novels in his book is meant to capture the connections between German-speaking Europe and the Caucasus, two realms that might seem entirely separate at first glance. However, it is not only in the Caucasus that Kermani encounters such complex webs of cultural, linguistic, and religious heritage. He sees them—and trains his readers to see them—everywhere he goes on his journey.

Kermani's project of remapping the east of Europe in this way is signaled already on the dust jacket of the German hard-bound edition of Kermani's book, which shows a literal map. It is a somewhat blurry, slightly enlarged and tilted version of the political map that is printed on both the front and back flyleaf, which also shows Kermani's route traced out in red. The map extends from Cologne, where Kermani lives, in the top-left corner, to Isfahan, where his parents come from, in the bottom-right corner; parts of Germany to the west of Cologne and parts of Iran to the east of Isfahan are trimmed off. To the eyes of German readers, and, by extension, Western European readers, this map is highly unusual because it suggests an alternative way of centering European geography. This is contrasted with the perceptual habits that Kermani describes towards the beginning of *Entlang den Gräben*: “tief im Westen Deutschlands geboren und aufgewachsen, schauten wir immer nach Frankreich, Italien, zu den Vereinigten Staaten; selbst den Orient kannten wir besser als den Osten des eigenen Landes.”⁷ His use of the first person plural here stakes a claim to a collective rather than individual experience.

⁷ Kermani, *Entlang den Gräben*, 21.

The blurriness of the map on the cover corresponds to Kermani's unfamiliarity with the region before he sets off on his journey; in one interview, he calls it "ein blinder Fleck für mich."⁸ In the center of the map is the Black Sea. Also prominent and fully visible are the countries that Kermani visits on his journey: Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and other territories in the Caucasus. The flyleaf additionally features a close-up map of the whole Caucasus, which, as it happens, covers up most of Italy and all of Greece on the main map. The map on the cover and flyleaf of the book is of a region further east than the maps that Kermani and his implied readers grew up seeing. In this way, the book challenges the potential reader's habitual perception of European geography before they even open it up. Many reviews of *Entlang den Gräben* confirm the effectiveness of this strategy. One reviewer praises "die Verschiebung des Blicks vom europäischen Zentrum in die sog. Peripherie" achieved by Kermani's book, which is necessary, since "man sich im Westen eher weniger für die Ränder Europas interessiert." The careful language used in this review ("the *so-called* periphery") performs the reorientation of perspective advocated by Kermani: "eben diese Verschiebung der Perspektiven ist programmatisch für sein Buch."⁹ Other readers of the book use strikingly similar vocabulary to describe this effect. For

⁸ Christoph Driessen, "Navid Kermani hat sich 'noch nie so deutsch gefühlt wie in Auschwitz,'" *Südkurier*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.suedkurier.de/ueberregional/kultur/Navid-Kermani-hat-sich-noch-nie-so-deutsch-gefuehlt-wie-in-Auschwitz;art10399,9631310>.

⁹ Irine Beridze, "Von Wald- und Wüstenmenschen—Navid Kermani: *Entlang den Gräben. Eine Reise durch das östliche Europa bis nach Isfahan*," *Read Ost. Der Blog für mittel- und osteuropäische Literatur und Kultur*, June 30, 2018. <https://read-ost.com/2018/06/30/navid-kermani-entlang-den-graeben/>.

example, one blogger writes: “durch *Entlang den Gräben* hat sich mein historisches Verständnis verschoben”;¹⁰ and one interviewer touches on this topic in a conversation with Kermani when he comments: “der Osten hinter dem Eisernen Vorhang ist nach Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges aus dem Blick gerückt.”¹¹ Kermani’s travelogue shifts the gaze of its German readers to the east—starting on the very cover of the book.

Reviewers’ preoccupation with the front cover indicates the potential for Western readers to regard this shift as a form of confrontation. Wolfgang Lienemann opens his review with the following observation: “die Innenseiten des Einbandes dieses Buches stellen Landkarten dar, die in diesem Zuschnitt sonst selten zu sehen sind und schon auf die Besonderheit des Buches verweisen: Fast ganz West- und Südeuropa sind abgeschnitten, so dass Deutschland ganz am Rand einer Landmasse zu liegen kommt, die weit nach Sibirien und vor allem bis zum Schwarzen Meer und zum Kaspischen Meer reicht.”¹² Other reviews confirm this view. One is illustrated with a reproduction of the map used in the book and states: “allein die geografischen Dimensionen dieses Teils von Europa haben mich, der ich

¹⁰ Janine Rumrich, “*Entlang den Gräben* von Navid Kermani oder Reise nach Osten,” *Frau Hemingway: Buch- und Literaturblog*, March 31, 2018, <https://frau-hemingway.de/entlang-den-graeben-von-navid-kermani-oder-reise-nach-osten/>.

¹¹ Ruth Bender, “Reise durch die Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts,” *Lübecker Nachrichten*, January 28, 2018, <https://www.ln-online.de/Nachrichten/Kultur/Kultur-im-Rest-der-Welt/Navid-Kermani-ueber-sein-Reisetagebuch-Entlang-den-Graeben-Osteuropa-Offenheit-und-Heimat.>

¹² Wolfgang Lienemann, “Vom östlichen Europa bis zum Iran,” *Fachbuchjournal*, <https://www.fachbuchjournal.de/vom-oestlichen-europa-bis-zum-iran/>.

mich in Geographie eigentlich als ziemlich bewandert betrachte, förmlich erschlagen.”¹³

Denis Scheck, writing for the *Tagesspiegel*, similarly calls it “ein horizontweiterndes Buch.”¹⁴

This quite literally enlarged or expanded understanding of Europe is signaled not only through the graphic design, but also in the subtitle of the book: *Eine Reise durch das östliche Europa bis nach Isfahan*. First of all, the subtitle implies that Europe stretches almost all the way to Isfahan—which is true, at least according to the definition used by geographers. Second, the phrase “das östliche Europa” used here is much less common than the usual “Osteuropa” and in this way further destabilizes the habitual ways of talking about and conceptualizing the region. The dust-jacket blurb uses another less common phrase, “der Osten Europas”; nowhere on the cover does the phrase “Osteuropa” come up, although it is used a few times in the text of the book itself. The use of this less common terminology might suggest a desire to displace the stark, Cold War-era division of the continent into two blocks. In the graphic design of the cover and the terminology used in the title, then, readers’ likely preconceptions about the region are carefully evoked but never reinforced.

Other paratextual elements, however, work against this nuanced approach. The first sentence of the back-cover blurb, also used in most online bookshops that sell the book, and as the description of Kermani’s book tour events, for example in Schauspiel Köln and

¹³ Mario Keipert, “Reisen (1): Navid Kermani—*Entlang den Gräben*,” *textwärts.*, May 26, 2018, <https://mariokeipert.de/textwaerts/navid-kermani-entlang-den-graeben> [accessed January 21, 2021].

¹⁴ Denis Scheck, “Denis Scheck kommentiert die Bestsellerliste,” *Tagesspiegel*, March 26, 2018, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/joschka-fischer-ranga-yogeshwar-und-michael-wolff-denis-scheck-kommentiert-die-bestsellerliste/21111230.html>.

Deutsches Theater in Berlin, reads: “ein immer noch fremd anmutendes, von Kriegen und Katastrophen zerklüftetes Gebiet beginnt östlich von Deutschland und erstreckt sich über Russland bis zum Orient.” Due to the syntax of this sentence, stereotypical clichés about the east of Europe precede even the naming of the destination of Kermani’s journey, which is described further on in the blurb as “vergessene Regionen.”¹⁵ Forgotten by whom? Seeming foreign and alien (“fremd”) to whom? Clearly not to people who live in or come from this part of the world; these formulations express the preconceptions that other elements of the paratextual apparatus seek to challenge. Similarly, the title of the book clearly links Isfahan and Europe, perhaps even suggesting that Isfahan belongs in it, whereas the back-cover blurb relegates it to an ill-defined, vague, and stereotypical sphere of the “Orient.”

The English edition of Kermani’s book, translated by Tony Crawford with a grant from the Goethe-Institut and published by Polity Press in 2020, looks and feels very different from C. H. Beck’s German edition. The cover features a grey-toned stock image of the so-called “Death Gate” in Auschwitz II-Birkenau, enveloped in fog. By using an image that metonymically represents German atrocities during World War II, it adheres to a familiar pattern for publications about Germany on the Anglophone book market. As a result, it reinforces the main association with the east of Europe that many Western European readers already have: the horrors of German death camps. The description of Kermani’s visit to Auschwitz has been highlighted in numerous reviews in Germany and elsewhere as one of the focal points of his journey. However, it takes place on the third of fifty-four days of travel, and so can hardly stand in for the journey in its entirety. Moreover, the book emphasizes the unfamiliarity of most of Europe’s east for Kermani and his implied readers.

¹⁵ As of April 15, 2021, C.H. Beck’s homepage still listed this description of the book, <https://www.chbeck.de/kermani-entlang-graben/product/29929924>.

Auschwitz is unusual in this respect and not representative of most of the places Kermani visits.

<<figure 1 around here>>

Caption: Cover of the German edition, C.H. Beck 2018.

Unlike the German edition, the English translation does not challenge established preconceptions about the region in its name either: “das östliche Europa” becomes the usual English term “Eastern Europe.” The back-cover blurb opens with a description of the region that further reinforces these preconceptions: “between Germany and Russia is a region strewn with monuments to the horrors of war, genocide, and disaster.” This description is problematic because it undermines Kermani’s goal of shifting and expanding his readers’ perception of the east of Europe in two ways. First, it only accurately describes less than half of Kermani’s text, the second half of which is set in the Caucasus and Iran, so not at all between Germany and Russia. Second, it reinforces the perception of the region—it is here simply an unnamed “region,” syntactically secondary to “Germany and Russia”—as a historical buffer zone between two powerful empires. While Kermani very often engages with this past in the book, and indeed visits many historical monuments, he does not reduce the east of Europe to a passive setting for wars waged by others. At the same time, he suggests that many historical catastrophes, including the Holocaust, are in fact not appropriately memorialized in several countries he visits. In any case, his portrayal of the region is far more nuanced than the English blurb implies.

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Credit: Cover design for the English translation of Kermani’s text, translated by Tony Crawford. Cover © Lyn Davies Design.

While the graphic design of the German edition manages to convey at least some of Kermani’s challenge to stereotypical representations of Europe’s east which are reinforced in

the framing of the English edition, the visual connotations of the earlier reportage in *Der Spiegel* are particularly complex. Unlike the book editions, the magazine reportage is illustrated with photographs taken by Dmitrij Leltschuk and Nazik Armenakyan, who accompanied Kermani on various stages of the journey, as well as small maps that illustrate Kermani's route. Like Kermani's text, the photos capture details of everyday life in the places he visits in ways that often challenge preconceptions about them. For example, the first part of the reportage includes Leltschuk's photo from Auschwitz that could not be more different from the stock photograph on the cover of the English translation of *Entlang den Gräben*: it shows a big group of smiling teenagers being photographed under the "Arbeit macht frei" sign on a sunny day, framed so that the sign itself is barely visible among the foliage of surrounding trees.¹⁶ This photo accompanies Kermani's conversation with a group of young Israeli tourists: he is interested in seeing Auschwitz through the eyes of the descendants of Holocaust survivors who come to see it. Kermani and his interlocutors participate in the reality of mass tourism that makes the memory culture in Auschwitz much more complex and ambiguous than conventionalized images of an empty, gloomy space imply.

Another graphic element that accompanies Kermani's reportage in *Der Spiegel* are small maps that schematically illustrate his route across the east of Europe. In the first part of the reportage, the map shows Germany and Poland; in the second, Lithuania is added; in the third, Belarus appears below Lithuania; in the fourth, Ukraine is added to the

¹⁶ See Navid Kermani, "Eine Reise entlang am Riss," *Der Spiegel*, October 1, 2016, <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/navid-kermani-reise-am-riss-entlang-nach-osten-a-1114814.html>.

south of Belarus.¹⁷ The resulting effect is that the map of the region literally expands as Kermani makes his way through it. This interpretation resonates with Kermani's own framing of his book in numerous press interviews: "Europa hat sich als viel größer erwiesen, als mir vorher bewusst war. Die eigentliche Mitte liegt nicht in Brüssel, Berlin oder Paris, sie verläuft durch die Bloodlands im Osten, der eigentlich Zentraleuropa ist."¹⁸ Kermani's use of the English term "Bloodlands," the title of historian Timothy Snyder's critically acclaimed book of 2010,¹⁹ which serves as a frequent point of reference on his journey, indicates an important fact: a map that shows a path from Germany to Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine is perhaps less unfamiliar to the German cultural imaginary than implied in the reviews of Kermani's book quoted above. It largely coincides with the Nazi propaganda maps of the German "Lebensraum" produced in large numbers before and during World War II, especially in the context of the "Generalplan Ost"; the territory where Hitler's and Stalin's cruel regimes met. In *Germany's Wild East: Constructing Poland as Colonial Space*, Kristin Kopp analyzes German "cartographic representation of lost colonial space in the interwar period": these maps, which show the German "Volksboden" and "Kulturboden" extending far beyond the eastern border of the German state, retrospectively linked the Nazi ideology of

¹⁷ See Navid Kermani, "Als wäre der Krieg nur ein Spiel," *Der Spiegel*, October 28, 2016, <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/mitten-durch-die-ukraine-reisetagebuch-von-navid-kermani-a-1118206.html>.

¹⁸ Bender, "Reise durch die Geschichte," *Lübecker Nachrichten*.

¹⁹ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (London: Vintage, 2011).

“Lebensraum” to historical events such as medieval Christianization.²⁰ Claims about Germany’s utter lack of familiarity with the east of Europe must be balanced by the recognition that for decades, or even centuries, this space functioned as Germany’s colonial fantasy land.

The map of Kermani’s journey in *Der Spiegel* eerily evokes the patterns of visual representation described by Kopp, intimately connected to Germany’s expansionist politics motivated by myths of cultural and ethnic superiority. As Kermani travels across the east of Europe, he negotiates the politics of memory inherent in the cultural discourse on this space. In several interviews, Kermani comments: “die Schrecken des Zweiten Weltkrieges und des Holocaust, die sich vor allem im östlichen Europa abgespielt haben, [wurden] zwar als Wissen bewahrt, aber sozusagen aus unserem topographischen Bewusstsein getilgt.”²¹ For Germans, the east of Europe is familiar as the setting of notorious historical events, and yet unfamiliar as a real space in the present day. The text of *Entlang den Gräben* repeatedly evokes this “erased” topographic or cartographic memory, for example in the passage about the river Memel, which Kermani describes as familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Unfamiliar, since he has never seen it before; familiar because its name appears in the very first strophe of the “Deutschlandlied” to denote the Eastern border of the lands inhabited by German-speaking peoples before Germany’s unification. But this strophe is no longer a part

²⁰ Kristin Kopp, *Germany’s Wild East: Constructing Poland as Colonial Space* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 124–59. See especially her Fig. 7 and Fig. 8 on 152–53. See also the map titled “The Bloodlands” in Snyder’s *Bloodlands*, ix.

²¹ Philipp Holstein, “Navid Kermani—der Geschichtsschreiber der Gegenwart,” *Rheinische Post*, February 15, 2018, https://rp-online.de/kultur/buch/navid-kermani-der-geschichtsschreiber-der-gegenwart_aid-18941767.

of the German national anthem due to its use during the Nazi era as an expression of Germany's expansionist ambitions. Every step of the way, Kermani's retelling of his journey is haunted by history and its cartographic representations.

But what is so interesting and unusual about Kermani's route is that it also stretches between his two homes—Cologne and Isfahan. As he says in one interview, "Köln und Isfahan sind ... Orte, an denen ich zu Hause bin. Und dazwischen liegen Welten, die ich nicht kenne. Diesen Weg zu machen, das war auch ein Auslöser für die Reise."²² Kermani makes clear that his journey does not just take him away from his German home, but also towards his other home in Iran. In his account, the cartographic memory of the Nazi era—which he accepts as part of his tarnished cultural legacy as a German, and seeks to understand and commemorate accordingly—coexists with his remapping of Europe's east as an area that geographically and culturally links and mediates between Germany and Iran, as he demonstrates time and again by describing various overlapping traditions in the region, including the three monotheistic religions.

Kermani's destination reframes his entire journey as not simply "east of Germany" (or, as I will explain shortly, "east of the Elbe"), but also "west of Isfahan"—a geographic point of reference that most Europeans are not used to seeing in this context. As Kermani put it in one interview, "plötzlich werden Deutschland und Iran Nachbarn, oder genauer gesagt, selbst zwei so fern scheinende Kulturen überlappen und vermischen sich."²³ Because he is familiar with both cultures, he can appreciate their intermingling, and consequently perceive and represent the region differently; his mental geography is richer. Kermani's goal is to share this appreciation of interconnectedness with his readers and help them change, or at

²² Bender, "Reise durch die Geschichte," *Lübecker Nachrichten*.

²³ Driessen, *Südkurier*.

least adjust, their mental geography too, even—or especially—if they do not share his cosmopolitan (migrant, minority) background. Kermani's readers can acquire this new perspective through exposure to his, by learning that there are people with different mental geographies which disrupt more widespread homogenous mappings and cultural narratives.

As I indicated above, many reviewers—both in the press and on personal blogs—describe how reading Kermani's book had just such an effect on them. Some more specialist reviews written by experts on the region, however, are more critical of Kermani's project. Edward Lucas, a writer and consultant who specializes in the questions of politics, economics, and security in Eastern Europe, wrote a mixed review for the *Financial Times*, one of only a handful that came out after the publication of the English translation of *Entlang den Gräben*. "Kermani's approach to Europe's eastern borderlands would attract instant condemnation if applied to Africa. Savage history, weird languages, exotic people—and some of them really well educated!," he writes sarcastically.²⁴ Similarly, Sonja Zekri, a writer and journalist with a degree in Slavonic Studies, asks rhetorically in her review in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, titled "Das westdeutsche Staunen des Navid Kermani": "ob der Orientalist Kermani glücklich wäre, wenn ein Westeuropäer auf diese Weise die Schädelstätten des Nahen Ostens abhaken würde?"²⁵ Nina Brnada similarly claims in her review in the Austrian weekly *Falter*: "Kermanis zuweilen penetrante Westperspektive

²⁴ Edward Lucas, "Along the Trenches—A Thought-Provoking Travelogue on Eastern Europe," *Financial Times*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/dc4f649e-d308-11e9-8d46-8def889b4137>.

²⁵ Sonja Zekri, "Das westdeutsche Staunen des Navid Kermani," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, February 20, 2018, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/entlang-den-graeben-das-westdeutsche-staunen-des-navid-kermani-1.3868657>.

erschwert den Versuch, den Osten wirklich zu begreifen.”²⁶ These comments emphasize Kermani’s position as a traveler from West Germany (or, more broadly, Germany, or even the West in general) to accuse him of an Orientalist or colonial perspective on Europe’s east. Lucas even echoes Kristin Kopp’s terminology when he writes of “an unconscious but very (West) German feeling that the ‘wild east’ starts on the Polish border.”²⁷

It surely is unfair to imply that Kermani is not conscious of his position, though, since he makes it explicit at every turn. In an attempt to discredit Kermani’s method—“particularly jarring is a preference for rhetorical questions over answers, and a blurry approach to facts”; “initial ignorance is not fatal in travel writing, but it needs to be balanced with humility and curiosity”; “throughout the book, this likeable and conscientious writer urges his readers to engage fair-mindedly with unfamiliar countries, cultures and history. Annoyingly, he does not follow his own strictures”²⁸—Lucas seems to miss the point of Kermani’s book. It is not intended as an expert handbook on Eastern Europe written from the perspective of area studies, but rather an attempt to shift the perception of the east of Europe today away from a place that is solely of interest to experts on European security. This implicit expectation becomes apparent when Lucas states that Kermani’s book “lacks a thread” and asks: “why has Kermani chosen these places and not others? If conflict is the theme, what about the Balkans? Or the other Baltic states? The approach is patchy.”²⁹ These rhetorical questions imply that there is a narrow array of themes that can or should be addressed when speaking of

²⁶ Nina Brnada, “Mit einem Deutschen durch den Osten,” *Falter* 9 (2018),

<https://shop.falter.at/detail/9783406714023>.

²⁷ Lucas, “*Along the Trenches*,” *Financial Times*.

²⁸ Lucas, “*Along the Trenches*,” *Financial Times*.

²⁹ Lucas, “*Along the Trenches*,” *Financial Times*.

the east of Europe and entirely overlook Kermani's personal project of remapping the region as a space that connects Germany and Iran in an attempt to break out of stereotypical approaches to Europe's east. Moreover, the idea that the ultimate goal of travel writing is to arrive at a fixed, objective understanding of a foreign land is itself deeply colonial in nature.³⁰

In considering whether Kermani's approach to the east of Europe risks orientalizing the region or is undermined by his West German perspective, it is also instructive to consider responses to his book in Poland. None of his books have been published in Polish, but a couple of shorter texts have been translated for the liberal Catholic magazine *Znak*,³¹ and in June 2018, a few months after the publication of *Entlang den Gräben*, Kermani shared the Samuel Bogumił Linde Prize, awarded jointly by partner cities Torun and Göttingen, with a respected Polish reportage writer Małgorzata Szejnert. Journalist Jacek Lepiarz wrote a Polish-language review of *Entlang den Gräben* for *Deutsche Welle*, in which he praised Kermani's book for exhibiting "dużo zrozumienia dla Polski" (a lot of understanding for Poland); he emphasizes that Kermani "chwali Europę Wschodnią za mocne trwanie przy swojej tożsamości i języku" (praises Eastern Europe for standing by its identity and language.)³² The only academic article on *Entlang den Gräben* written by a Slavist so far—Stephan Walter—similarly finds Kermani's perspective valuable: "für Slavisten und Regionalexperthen kann die Lektüre insofern bereichernd sein, da eine vertraute Region mit

³⁰ I am indebted to one of the reviewers of the manuscript for this last observation.

³¹ Here I would like to acknowledge Michał Jędrzejek, who translated one of these texts for *Znak* and introduced me to Kermani's work in 2016.

³² Jacek Lepiarz, "Pisarz Navid Kermani: zrozumieć Polskę i Europę Wschodnią," *Deutsche Welle*, February 13, 2018, my translation, <https://www.dw.com/pl/pisarz-navid-kermani-zrozumieć-polskę-i-europę-wschodnią/a-42558912>.

den Augen eines neugierigen Fremden, eines Durchreisenden neu betrachtet wird, der, je weiter östlich er sich befindet, seine eigene Perspektive allmählich verändert.”³³ In a similar vein, in 2017 Adam Krzemiński wrote an article introducing Kermani for *Polityka*, one of the most popular Polish weeklies, in which he mentions many of Kermani’s reportage works, including his reportage from Eastern Europe published in *Der Spiegel*, which he suggests should find a publisher in Poland.³⁴ Restricted as Kermani’s reception in Poland might be to date, it is striking that his work has been widely praised and recognized, and specifically his writing on Europe’s east has been presented as highly interesting, fair, and valuable.

What this implies is that the expectations that some Western European experts on Eastern Europe place on *Entlang den Gräben* might be out of touch not only with non-expert readers in Germany, but also readers in Eastern Europe itself. It also challenges the thesis that Kermani’s book is “ein sehr deutsches Buch für sehr deutsche Leser,” as one Austrian reviewer stated.³⁵ (It is interesting to note that from the perspective of an Austrian reviewer, the book is “German” rather than specifically “West German.”) A persistent thread in

³³ Stephan Walter, “Kermanis Osteuropa: Perspektiven eines Nicht-nur-Deutschen auf eine unvertraute Region,” *Russland übersetzen / Russia in Translation / Россия в переводе*, ed. Christine Engel, Irina Pohlen, and Stephan Walter (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2020), 81–91 (81).

³⁴ Adam Krzemiński, “Navid Kermani—pisarz z pogranicza kultur,” *Polityka*, March 14, 2017, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/swiat/1697406,1,navid-kermani--pisarz-z-pogranicza-kultur.read?page=4&moduleId=4781>.

³⁵ Bert Rebhandl, “Navid Kermani: In 55 Tagen 5115 Kilometer,” *Der Standard*, February 24, 2018, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000074876350/navid-kermani-in-55-tagen-5115-kilometer>.

Kermani's writings is his orientation not only towards other cosmopolitan intellectuals like himself, but also towards people different from him, both in terms of educational background and political outlook. This is reflected in *Entlang den Gräben* too, where in each country he visits, Kermani speaks to a wide range of interlocutors. In Poland, for example, he meets prominent journalists from the full spectrum of Polish politics: both left and right wing.

Kermani's ability to speak to people who disagree with him, and not just preach to the converted, has won him a lot of praise from different quarters, as shown even in some reviews from more right-wing readers. David Platzer complements *Along the Trenches* in his review in *The Catholic Herald* despite betraying a political orientation much more to the right of the book's author. For example, he does not appreciate the fact that "Kermani follows the standard line against nationalism as the root of all evil," but he praises him by adding: "even so, he quotes others who feel differently."³⁶ Another reviewer writes similarly that "Kermani's talent as a writer, and a journalist, is his ability to not only encourage people to talk to him, but to report what they say with little or no filtering." He gives the following example: "we hear from both sides of the Ukraine conflict: those who want the Crimea to be part of Russia and those who want it to stay part of the Ukraine and each of them sounds perfectly reasonable. In fact, the most frightening thing about this book is how everybody sounds so reasonable."³⁷ But this strategy does not compromise Kermani's own strongly held

³⁶ David Platzer, "A Mournful Travelogue from Cologne to Isfahan," *Catholic Herald*, January 16, 2020, <https://catholicherald.co.uk/a-mournful-travelogue-from-cologne-to-isfahan/>.

³⁷ Richard Marcus, "Book Review: *Along The Trenches* by Navid Kermani," *Blogcritics*, December 11, 2019, <https://blogcritics.org/book-review-along-the-trenches-by-navid-kermani/>.

beliefs. In her discussion of Kermani's earlier reportage about the refugee crisis, *Einbruch der Wirklichkeit*, Claudia Breger calls his approach "engaged" or "ethical realism." She argues that "in engaging anti-refugee perspectives, and acknowledging the concerns underlying them, Kermani does not in any way justify the transformation of concern into hatred, or the discursive articulation of hatred as concern that has acquired prominence in recent German politics."³⁸

This ability is a function of Kermani's programmatic belief, reiterated in many of his essays and speeches, and in *Vergesst Deutschland! Eine patriotische Rede* (Forget Germany! A Patriotic Speech) linked specifically to his reading of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's work. It is his belief in "de[n] Respekt für das andere und die Unerbittlichkeit gegen das Eigene."³⁹ This is the foundation of Kermani's ability to perceive problematic aspects of his own perspective and of his empathy with others, even if he disagrees with them. As Edward Lucas puts it, "he shows an appealing, instinctive sympathy with the underdog and the outsider—the pervasive feeling of being on the margin of a richer, safer and happier life."⁴⁰ It is from this perspective that Kermani approaches supporters of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) in Schwerin, for instance: while strongly disagreeing with their chosen form of political

³⁸ Breger, "*Einbruch der Wirklichkeit* (Incursion of Reality): Navid Kermani's Engaged Realism," 41.

³⁹ Navid Kermani, *Vergesst Deutschland! Eine patriotische Rede* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2012), 27. See also Karolin Machtans, "Navid Kermani: Advocate for an Antipatriotic Patriotism and a Multireligious, Multicultural Europe," in *Envisioning Social Justice in Contemporary German Culture*, ed. Jill E. Twark and Axel Hildebrandt (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2015), 290–311.

⁴⁰ Lucas, "*Along the Trenches*."

action, he seeks to understand their frustration with everyday problems such as low pensions. His desire “die Selbstkritik zum Prinzip zu erheben”⁴¹ is also why Kermani is often critical towards Islam and Iran. In his review in *The Jewish Herald-Voice*, Aaron Howard goes as far as to claim that in Iran, “Kermani’s objectivity slides” and “he sounds a bit judgmental”⁴²—but this is precisely because Kermani feels a moral obligation to a heightened critical self-awareness when writing about Isfahan. In *Entlang den Gräben*, Kermani is not only critical towards Iran, but also West Germany, Western Europe more generally, and its middle-class, left-leaning intellectual milieu: all of which inform his own identity. From the opening of the book, he critically analyzes his own implicit assumptions and biases as they emerge during his journey.

Here it is important to note that Kermani’s journey does not start in Poland, but in his own largely migrant neighborhood in Cologne, evoked through an extract from his 2011 novel *Dein Name* (Your Name), before moving to Schwerin in East Germany. The travelogue itself opens with Kermani’s question in the middle of a conversation with one of his interviewees in Schwerin, a woman from Syria: “‘Gibt es denn überhaupt keine Probleme?’ frage ich ungläubig die Frau, die in der Plattenbausiedlung die Sonntagsschule für syrische Kinder leitet. ‘Nein,’ antwortet die Frau, ‘nicht wirklich.’ Ab und zu mal ein unschönes Wort wegen ihres Kopftuchs, aber was sei das schon gegen das, was ihre Familie in Syrien durchgemacht habe, im Krieg. Das Kind, das sie im Bauch trage, werde in Frieden

⁴¹ Kermani, *Vergesst Deutschland! Eine patriotische Rede*, 27.

⁴² Aaron Howard, “*Along the Trenches Follows Writer’s Eastward Trek*,” *The Jewish Herald-Voice*, March 26, 2020, <https://jhvonline.com/along-the-trenches-follows-writers-eastward-trek-p27419-152.htm>.

geboren.”⁴³ In Schwerin, Kermani meets a woman from Syria: although he does not say this explicitly, in the very first sentence of his travelogue the approximate geographical outlines of the region he will travel across are intimated, with Syria and Iran separated only by a strip of south-eastern Turkey and northern Iraq, inhabited—like the neighboring regions in Syria and Iran—largely by Kurds. This opening passage evokes several common tropes of German narratives about the refugee crisis: Muslim children practicing their Arabic in an East-German “Plattenbausiedlung,” while white Germans verbally abuse their teacher, a pregnant Syrian woman wearing a headscarf. But all this is undercut from the start by Kermani’s question: primed by alarmist reports in the media, he had expected the situation in Schwerin to be riddled with all sorts of dramatic tensions, and yet it is far from it. As he gradually discovers, the situation poses problems, but they are largely met with pragmatic solutions. The question that Kermani starts with alludes to the tone of sensationalist media reports about the integration of refugees in Germany, but the passages that follow focus on the everyday, lived reality of inhabitants of Schwerin, such as the condition of local allotments.

The fact that the first stop on Kermani’s journey is in Schwerin suggests that for him, “das östliche Europa” does not start east of Germany, but rather in East Germany, east of the river Elbe. As some reviewers have pointed out, “bei dieser Frage [wo beginnt der Osten?] muss Kermani an Konrad Adenauer denken.”⁴⁴ Adenauer was said to “close the curtains in his train compartment whenever he passed eastwards across the Elbe, muttering: ‘schon

⁴³ Kermani, *Entlang den Gräben*, 13.

⁴⁴ Christoph Driessen, “Navid Kermani erkundet Osteuropa,” *Frankfurter Neue Presse*, February 12, 2018, <https://www.fnp.de/kultur/navid-kermani-erkundet-osteuropa-10421841.html>.

wieder Asien”⁴⁵—a fact which James Hawes has recently taken as an emblematic expression of a much wider and much longer tendency in German history to see the country as fundamentally split into two cultural zones, long before the advent of the Cold War.⁴⁶ The tendency to view the east of Europe as more akin to Asia has a long history in Germany culture, too; the region was often referred to as “Halb-Asien” in the nineteenth century, for example.⁴⁷ The cultural trope of a fundamental division of Europe into two cultural zones is reflected in the title of Kermani’s book. As he has explained in several interviews, and as many reviewers note too, the title is polysemous. The word “ein Graben” can refer literally to sites where soil had been “umgegraben”—war trenches, mass graves (the word “ein Grab” shares this etymology), and even the decontamination of soil after the radioactive explosion in Chernobyl—but it can also be used figuratively to describe ideological and cultural divides. Kermani seeks to bring both these literal and figurative trenches to light, but he also seeks to bridge the divides in the mutual perceptions of different parts of Europe. He challenges the stereotypical narrative about an ideological and cultural “Graben” separating Western from Eastern Europe, but he also attempts to keep various points of view in play, including this widespread stereotype itself.

This strategy has its risks. While many reviews testify to its effectiveness in challenging readers’ mental habits, as demonstrated above, it is not always successful. One

⁴⁵ James Hawes, *The Shortest History of Germany* (London: Old Street Publishing, 2017), 150.

⁴⁶ For a critical review of Hawes’s thesis, see Seán Williams, “Telling Trabbies from Junkers,” *History Today*, 67 (2017), <https://www.historytoday.com/reviews/telling-trabbies-junkers-0>.

⁴⁷ Kopp, *Germany’s Wild East*, 104.

review on Amazon states: “das Buch macht Lust auf eine Reise in den wilden Osten, der uns merkwürdig fremd ist, obwohl er so nahe liegt”;⁴⁸ another reviewer writes on Goodreads: “gemeinsam mit dem Autor, stellt man beim Lesen fast, wie fern doch der so nahe Osten eigentlich ist.”⁴⁹ Both reviews reproduce the clichéd terminology and binary categories to describe the region that Kermani challenges (“nah”—“fern,” “wild,” “fremd”); they insist on the fundamental discontinuity between the East and the West. Meanwhile, the very format of Kermani’s travelogue seems to make the opposite claim. It is divided into chapters headed by the number of travel days that have elapsed rather than countries visited; the changes between different places Kermani visits tend to be described as gradual and incremental; the suggestion is that there is no fundamental break between the familiar and the unfamiliar. As discussed above, this is facilitated by the fact that for Kermani, neither his start nor his end point are foreign: he is travelling between two familiar places.

But upon closer inspection, the tension between continuity and discontinuity turns out to be present in the structure and format of *Entlang den Gräben* too. At the very end of the book, the messy reality behind Kermani’s journey is acknowledged. It turns out that the whole travelogue is in fact based on several separate journeys undertaken in 2016 and 2017—a fact that is only mentioned in passing in the main text.⁵⁰ It was impossible to travel

⁴⁸ Tobias Oberzeller, “Ein wunderbarer Reisebericht der den Leser einfängt!” Amazon, April 4, 2018, <https://www.amazon.com/Entlang-den-Gräben/dp/3406747671>.

⁴⁹ Melanie, “*Entlang den Gräben: Eine Reise durch das östliche Europa bis nach Isfahan*,” Goodreads, April 12, 2018, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2359398531>.

⁵⁰ Swen Schulte Eickholt discusses the significance of form in *Entlang den Gräben* in his chapter “‘Aber manches versteht man auch erst, wenn man reist, nicht wenn man bleibt.’ Der Schriftsteller als Berichterstatter—zu Navid Kermanis Reportagen (2001–2018),” in *Navid*

directly across several borders on Kermani's route because of political tensions in the region. This intrusion of politically motivated discontinuity into the (seemingly continuous) narrative of cultural continuity could be termed "Einbruch der Wirklichkeit" (Eruption of Reality) following the title of Kermani's earlier reportage about the refugee crisis.⁵¹ Magda Tarnawska Senel described the structure of that earlier reportage as fragmented, so that it "parallels and underscores both the shattered lives of the refugees and the divided Europe."⁵² But in *Entlang den Gräben*, the focus is on unity as much as fragmentation, continuity as well as discontinuity, both in the content of the text—the geographic and cultural reality of the east of Europe—and its form—with several shorter trips disrupted by political tensions reconstructed as one long journey, but then deconstructed again in the paratextual note appended by the author.

Kermani, ed. Michael Hofmann, Klaus von Stosch, and Swen Schulte Eickholt, 207–29 (216). He comments on the illusion that Kermani creates of having made only one journey, and the fact that his narrative is broken down into individual days rather than separate countries, but does not consider that its goal might be to reflect or enact the fluidity of borders that Kermani describes.

⁵¹ Navid Kermani, *Einbruch der Wirklichkeit: Auf dem Flüchtlingstreck durch Europa* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2016).

⁵² Magda Tarnawska Senel, "Europe, the Middle East, and Identities in Transition: Navid Kermani's *Einbruch der Wirklichkeit. Auf dem Flüchtlingstreck durch Europa*," in *Anxious Journeys: Twenty-First-Century Travel Writing in German*, ed. Karin Baumgartner and Monika Shafi (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2019), 40–56 (42). See also Elke Segelcke, "The Political Anthropology of Navid Kermani's Travelogues," in *Navid Kermani*, ed. Helga Druxes, Karolin Machtans, and Alexander Mihailovic, 181–200.

In *Entlang den Gräben*, the east of Europe is represented not only in the text of the book, but also in its rich paratextual material, including maps, photographs, and evocations of historical cartography as well as perceptual habits of the book's potential readers. By analyzing this material, we can better understand not only Kermani's representational strategy, but also the multi-layered background of historical and present-day forms of representation of the region that he is working against. Given Kermani's orientation towards a diverse readership, it is particularly instructive to see how his book fares in the hands of real-life readers from various backgrounds, ranging from Western European experts on Eastern Europe to Polish journalists to German readers posting reviews on the Internet. Several themes come to the fore again and again in Kermani's text, as well as the titles, subtitles, and covers of the German and English editions of the book, the different maps and photographs featured in the initial reportage in *Der Spiegel*, and recurring vocabulary choices made in various reviews and discussions of *Entlang den Gräben*. In his project of remapping the east of Europe, Kermani models a critical reassessment of one's own perspective for his readers—a shifting of one's gaze—by highlighting tensions between familiarity and unfamiliarity as well as continuity and discontinuity in his encounter with the region.

Entlang den Gräben makes clear that German cultural identity has been shaped by its relationship to its Eastern neighbors, and has heavily influenced that region in turn. In this way, Kermani's book can be placed in the context of recent literary scholarship that considers the entanglements of local, national, imperial, and global allegiances that have always made up German culture, such as Todd Kontje's monograph *Imperial Fictions: German Literature Before and Beyond the Nation-State*, published in the same year as *Entlang den Gräben*.⁵³

⁵³ Todd Kontje, *Imperial Fictions: German Literature Before and Beyond the Nation-State* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

Much like Kermani's travelogue, Kontje's sweeping account moves from the Middle Ages to the present day in an attempt to rewrite the history of German culture without taking the problematic concept of the unitary nation as its starting point. Kermani's narrative both highlights and questions present-day state boundaries in the area stretching between his hometown of Cologne and his parents' hometown of Isfahan, repeatedly pointing to the power of literature, arts, and culture—such as Kurban Said's novel *Ali und Nino* with which I started my discussion—to reimagine the boundaries of political communities. His own book contributes to the same project: like much of his other work, it links the identity of contemporary multilingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-faith Europe to its rich, complex history. In this article, I have discussed Kermani's narrative strategies, the paratextual material framing various versions of his text, and the reception of his book in Germany and beyond to show how a finer focus on the fraught history of the cultural relations between Germany and Europe's east can become a gateway to a reflection on multicultural entanglements, inequalities, and interdependencies more broadly, which—needless to say—we badly need in our own cultural moment.