The French writer Maurice Barrès, a politically influential writer at the time of the Third republic who was born in the border region of Lorraine, once told the following story: One day, before the First World War, he took his son to the border, on the crest of the Vosges, between the German Empire and France, which had been newly established as a result of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871. "Over there live the Germans", said Barrès. "Do they have souls", his son asked. "No", replied his father and made the following entry in his diary: 'I knew it was an idiocy, but such idiocies produce energies.'

This differentiation of the human psyche - made with an apparently cynical reservation, it is true - this susceptibility to borders verging on the absurd is only the prelude to even more gruesome events in our century: Europeans denying their neighbours beyond the borders the right to a homeland, the right to exist, after degrading them to subhuman beings. This attitude is at the same time the culmination of a tendency that has increased perceptibly since the beginning of modern times, a tendency of the nation states defining their territories to concentrate their national characteristics on their borders, so that the political, economic, cultural and, if possible, linguistic borders could fall together. Even today, the feeling that the greatest possible differentiation - including culture and language - is the natural condition on both sides of the border is still very common: "Pourquoi parle-t-on allemand de ce côté-ci de la frontière politique alors qu'on ne parle pas français de l'autre côté"! is how Jean Richard from Strasbourg, in an article on the situation in Lorraine, quotes a physician from French-speaking Lorraine as saying. It is obvious that the doctor misunderstands the linguistic situation in Lorraine, which has developed over the centuries, where the Franco-German national and linguistic borders do not correspond. Yet in Belgium, in the language dispute between Flemings and Walloons, a traditional political unit, Brabant, is required to be divided into a Flemish and a Walloon district, with the linguistic border also becoming the political one. The old pattern, the notion of the identity of cultural, administrative, and political borders is lingering on, forcing upon us the permanent topicality of our reflections about borders.

But both actual borders and the concept of the 'border' are also bound to become topical issues now that Western Europe is discussing the abolition of economic and political borders in the course of the formation and further development of supra-national communities and is developing concrete plans to implement this (1993). At the same time, we feel, in the wake of regional upheavals, the urgent need to discuss the stability and inviolability of the post-war borders in Central and Eastern Europe; unfortunately, this discussion has not always been a peaceful one. In the dilemma of stability and abolition of borders the notion of border has in the meantime become a topic of vital significance in the 'European house', a topic both fascinating and frightening in various ways. Not only politicians but also many