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STATES OF DIVISION

Border & Boundary
Formation in Cold War
Rural Germany

SAGI SCHAEFER



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and

JAMES RETALLACK

States of Division

*Border and Boundary Formation
in Cold War Rural Germany*

SAGI SCHAEFER

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To Tali, Aviv and Gil

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Abbreviations

BGS	West German Federal Border Guard (<i>Bundesgrenzschutz</i>)
EEC	European Economic Community (<i>Europäische Wirtschaftsgemeinschaft</i>)
EU	European Union
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany)
GDR	German Democratic Republic (East Germany)
GIP	Border Information Points (<i>Grenzinformationenpunkte</i>)
GNV	border area traffic (<i>Grenznahverkehr</i>), 1973–89
Grepö/GP	East German Border Police (<i>Grenzpolizei</i>)
HO	Official government trade stores in East Germany (<i>Handelsorganisation</i>)
KGv	Little Border Traffic (<i>Kleine Grenzverkehr</i>), 1946–52
LPG	Agricultural collective (<i>Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft</i>)
MdF	Ministry or Minister of Finance (<i>Ministerium der Finanzen</i>)
MdI	Minister or Ministry of the Interior (<i>Ministerium des Innern</i>)
MfgF	West German Ministry for All-German Affairs (<i>Bundesministerium für Gesamtdetusche Fragen</i>)
MTS	Machine and Tractor Stations (<i>Maschinen-Traktoren Stationen</i>)
NVA	National People's Army (<i>Nationale Volksarmee</i>), East German army
PoW	Prisoner of War
SED	Socialist Unity Party (<i>Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland</i>), East German ruling party
SMAD	Soviet Military Administration
SBZ	Soviet Occupation Zone (<i>Sovietische Besatzungszone</i>)
SPD	Social Democratic Party
VEB	People's Enterprise (<i>Volkseigene Betrieb</i>), nationalized factories, businesses and other enterprises in East Germany
VP	People's Police (<i>Volkspolizei</i>), East German police
ZGD/ZGS	Customs Service/Customs Guard (<i>Zollgrenzdienst/Zollgrenzschutz</i>), West German Customs Service
ZRG	Zonal Border Area (<i>Zonenrandgebiet</i>), the West German term for the area along the border with East Germany

ARCHIVES

BArch-B	Federal Archive, Berlin
BArch-K	Federal Archive, Koblenz
BArch-M	Federal Military Archive, Freiburg
BStU	Archives of the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Files (several locations)
HeHStAW	Main Hessian State Archive, Wiesbaden
HeStAM	Hessian State Archive, Marburg
KrAGö	District Archive, Rural District of Göttingen, Lower Saxony
KrAEich	Eichsfeld District Archive, Heiligenstadt, Thuringia
NARA	United States National Archives, College Park, Maryland

NLA-HStAH	Main Lower Saxon State Archive, Hanover
NLA-StAW	Lower Saxon State Archive, Wolfenbüttel
StADud	Duderstadt Municipal Archive, Lower Saxony
StAGö	Göttingen Municipal Archive, Lower Saxony
StAHig	Heiligenstadt Municipal Archive, Thuringia
StAWitz	Witzenhausen Municipal Archive, Hessen
ThHStAW	Main Thuringian State Archive, Weimar

PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

The majority of documents used in this work are from the above named archives. I thank Ben Thustek and the Grenzlandmuseum Eichsfeld in Teistungen for helping me get in touch with several Eichsfelder, some of whom have shared some private documents with me. In the book, documents have been used from three private collections. Two of the owners requested to remain anonymous. The third is Siegfried Schmidt from Duderstadt, a long-time official, now retired, of the district of Duderstadt.

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Introduction

A border's function and meaning are the sum total of decisions and actions of people; they cannot be deduced from maps and treaties. The border between East and West Germany effected considerable changes, most significantly the emergence of deep-set social boundaries in Germany. This book analyses bordering processes in postwar Germany to show that interactions between individuals, organizations, and communities determined this outcome. It focuses on practices, and examines what people and organizations did when faced with new lines on the map and on the ground. Communities, families, and organizations in Germany were initially unconstrained by the borders arbitrarily set between occupation zones. At the outset, the inter-German border was a bustling place where West and East met regularly, worked together, traded, and celebrated common traditions; where local authorities cooperated as a matter of routine. Fluidity and cooperation were not undone by diplomatic fiat or by the early development of the Cold War. Rather, border formation only gradually wove demarcation lines into the social and political fabric of imagined and experienced communities. This book tells the story of the four-decade-long voyage between two *States of Division*: the indefinite, unruly one and the well-defined, disciplined one.

Two parallel projects of state building in East and West Germany partnered in constructing the border to attain power and recognition, and relied on separation for legitimacy and mobilization. To achieve this, state organizations were forced into difficult conflicts and negotiations with frontier society. Intensive interaction *within* the divided territorial polities east and west of the border limited the possibility of interaction *across* the divide. Prolonged negotiations altered border policy on both sides and reoriented frontier economy and politics towards the separate centres in Bonn and East Berlin. The arbitrary partition thus gradually turned into a meaningful boundary. Western policy was as pivotal in creating the inter-German divide as the more infamous Eastern initiatives of physical division.

The process of division was long and complicated partly because it took place primarily in a rural environment. Forested hills, open expanses of snow and frost in winter, painted brown, and then green in spring, crisscrossed by field roads and streams, and dotted by villages and small towns: this was the landscape of the Iron Curtain. Frontier farmers became protagonists in the drama of border formation and state building when state agents ventured to regulate and control the borderlands. Land, and its centrality in rural society's economy and tradition, became the crux of drawn-out struggles between frontier communities and state agencies. The parameters of the rural borderlands, such as private land ownership and the breadth

of open space, were at least as important in the development of German division as the policies made in Washington, Moscow, Berlin, and Bonn.¹ *States of Division* is the first book to analyse the impact of rural conditions on the manner in which temporary political demarcations turned into stable social boundaries along the Iron Curtain.

In this process, East and West Germany, indeed *The East* and *The West*, were produced and reproduced in the German borderlands. This book foregrounds interactions between individuals and organizations as the source of the transformations that produced separate East and West German communities. For example, when in 1952 the East German regime deported thousands of residents from the borderlands and declared new regulations for the restricted zone, thousands of frontier residents fled to the West. This unforeseen reaction confronted the regime with a significant drop in agricultural production. To avoid further depletion of workforce at the frontier, East German state agencies adopted a policy of leniency towards frontier residents and attempted to accommodate their needs. The result was a compromise, whereby East German frontier farmers were given land east of the border and were allowed to quietly keep their ownership over land west of the border. In return, they cooperated in excluding Western frontier farmers from ownership rights east of the border. The interwoven processes of state building and border formation thus fuelled the division of German society. Focusing on interactions offers a way out of a dichotomous interpretation of agency in border formation. This method emphasizes neither the state agents' role in division nor that of the 'ordinary people'. Instead, it shows how different state and civil organizations, communities, and individuals created division by interacting with the ever-changing border and among each other.

This book underscores the reactive, multi-actor dynamics of border and boundary formation. Division was absorbed in Germans' perceptions of space and sense of belonging because they practised it over time. Rather than concentrating on the exceptional, the violent, and the outstanding, I emphasize the routine and the repeated, the acts that occupied the largest proportion of frontier residents' and state agents' time and attention.

Division as a stable reality materialized through experience rather than imposition. Economic motives drove the earliest incursions of state agencies into the routine practice of frontier communities and networks. Prioritizing state building through economic stabilization and growth, Western state agencies initiated an escalation of border control in the years 1948–52. Supervision of border crossing goods was dramatically tightened as part of an effort to combat black marketeering. Border-crossing trade was crucial to frontier economy at that time, and in an attempt to curb it, state agencies increasingly restricted the economic opportunities of individuals and communities in the borderlands.

In May 1952, East German state building changed gear and moved forward, taking the initiative from the West in pushing division deeper into the experience

¹ See George Last, *After the 'Socialist Spring': Collectivisation and Economic Transformation in the GDR* (New York: Berghahn, 2009), xxiv and FN 13 for a similar argument.

and daily lives of Germans. The Socialist Unity Party (SED) regime declared the former zonal demarcation 'State Border West', and ventured to uphold strict discipline around it. The newly established state agencies were no match for this enormous task, but their declarations were not empty. Violent deportations and mass flight to the West marked the early stages of this operation. When the dust settled, it turned out that on the ground the new regulations stood in the way of relatively few daily practices. The most dramatic transformation brought by this regulation was in agriculture, at that time still a mainstay of frontier economy and an important anchor of identification for many frontier residents. The following two decades saw bitter struggles over land between frontier farmers and state agencies on both sides of the border. When border formation engaged the land it disturbed deeply rooted land-based practices, interests, and identifications. The ensuing conflicts gave rise to new orientations and loyalties. Such changes served as a foundation for boundaries, which emerged within previously cohesive networks, communities, and families; that was the process of German division. As it evolved, land along the border was gradually taken over by state agencies. Cultivated land diminished on the frontier and barren, enclosed plots replaced it. The 'green border', as the belt of parks along the border came to be called in the 1990s, originated in this no man's land.

Along the inter-German border, regional communities and administrations struggled to keep valued traditions and coordination on pragmatic issues alive in the face of the emerging separation. The biggest hurdle before them was the West German campaign against recognition of the GDR, especially from 1955. This diplomatic tenet of the Federal Government dictated strict supervision by East and West German state agencies over every border-crossing contact. Enforcing symbolic political priorities on regional coordination initiatives, state agencies eventually deprived such contacts of value and by 1960 these initiatives had all died out. Border-crossing regional networks and communities were thus severed before the construction of the wall in Berlin. Under Willy Brandt, the West German government changed direction, and in 1972 reached a historical compromise with its East German neighbour. The Basic Treaty they signed transformed the denied border into an openly negotiated one and instituted permanent state-level coordination in the Border Committee. After long years of complete separation, however, local and regional coordination proved unresuscitable.

The inter-German compromise also increased the opportunities for border-crossing travel, with new checkpoints and a special permit for Western frontier residents. Travel and interaction across the border increased, leading to a partial re-emergence of personal and kinship networks. It also confronted Germans with the differences that had developed between them over decades of separation. Travel served as the bookend issue for this period. Division appeared in the lives of Germans through travel limitations imposed in the spring and summer of 1945, and it was through the undoing of travel limitations that division most palpably ended in 1989, as the inter-German border opened for free crossing for all. In contrast to the dramatic events of 1945 and 1989, though, most inter-German travel between those years was quite unimpressive. The trajectory of border-crossing

travel shows that the opening of the inter-German border should be seen as a gradual development unfolding from the mid-1980s.

Through four decades of state building and border formation, frontier residents on both sides of an arbitrary line reoriented themselves towards state agencies' regulations. Despite their rivalry, state agencies on both sides of the border shared an interest in a clear demarcation of jurisdictions. The official compromise between the two governments in 1972 was crucial for the final cementing of division along the border. Interacting with divergent sets of expectations and rules, members of two parts of the German national community learned to think of themselves as different from each other.

BRINGING THE RURAL BACK IN

The rural nature of the inter-German border has been masked by an overrepresentation in literature of urban environments. Berlin has always attracted more attention than any other part of the border. The divided metropolis, severed by an ominous wall, provided captivating imagery. Berlin was the most important icon of the Cold War,² and the 'fall' of the Berlin Wall remains the most dramatic marker of its end. Little wonder, then, that scholars have studied Berlin more extensively than any other part of the inter-German border.³

Since 1990, and especially during the past decade, scholars have turned their attention to other areas, realizing that Berlin, an enclave within the German Democratic Republic (GDR), was highly unrepresentative. The emerging new history of the inter-German border relies on an exploration of other parts of the inter-German border between Lübeck in the north and Hof in the south.⁴

² Patrick Major makes a similar point in his recent book. See Patrick Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall: East Germany and the Frontiers of Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1.

³ The list of studies of divided Berlin and the different aspects of city life leading to or emanating from the building of the Wall is too long to recount here. Some examples from recent years include: Frank Roggenbuch, *Das Berliner Grenzgängerproblem* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008); Hope M. Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall: Soviet-East German Relations, 1953–1961* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Pertti Aho, *Death at the Berlin Wall* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Hans-Hermann Hertle, Konrad H. Jarausch and Christoph Kleßmann (eds), *Mauerbau und Mauerfall: Ursachen—Verlauf—Auswirkungen* (Berlin: Links, 2002); Edgar Wolfrum, *Die Mauer: Geschichte einer Teilung* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2009).

⁴ For some recent examples, see: Maren Ullrich, *Geteilte Ansichten: Erinnerungslandschaft deutsch-deutsche Grenze* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2006); Edith Sheffer, *Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). See also Edith Sheffer, 'On Edge: Building the Border in East and West Germany', *Central European History* 40 (2007): 307–39. Astrid M. Eckert is preparing a book under the working title, 'West Germany and the Iron Curtain'. She began this project with an investigation of border tourism in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). See Astrid Eckert, "'Greetings from the Zonal Border": Tourism to the Iron Curtain in West Germany', *Zeithistorische Forschung/Studies in Contemporary History* 8 (2011): 9–36. Jason Johnson wrote a dissertation about the division of a village on the Bavarian–Thuringian border. See Jason B. Johnson, 'Dividing Mödlareuth: The Incorporation of Half a German Village into the GDR Regime, 1945–1989' (PhD diss., Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 2011). These projects, and my own, owe a great deal to the late Daphne Berdahl's fascinating anthropological analysis of an East German frontier village following the unification of Germany in 1990. See Daphne Berdahl,

I build on this developing body of research to push the analysis further by focusing on rural conditions, often a hidden variable in the history of twentieth-century Europe. The majority of Europeans no longer made their living off the land; the power of the great estate owners had been broken under both socialist and capitalist systems. Industry, commerce, services, finance, and media—all urban enterprises—became the primary engines of economic expansion and agricultural lobbies lost much of their power. Residents of rural areas leave far less behind in material and written sources than do urban dwellers, and so relatively few historians today pay attention to people and areas largely perceived as objects of the modernization process.

Urban and rural spaces differ on many parameters crucial for border formation. Constructing and supervising urban borders typically requires only minor conflicts with private property, whereas establishing rural borders invariably means large-scale land appropriation and negotiation with private owners. Urban space is dense and narrow, giving rise to intense interaction with state agents and regulations. In most villages along the inter-German border, state presence prior to the emergence of the border was minimal; in 1945 many of them did not even have a school, a post office, or a police station. To understand how the border took on a certain shape, and how division itself shaped society, one has to account for these conditions.

Border formation in rural areas necessitated a transformation of the relations between frontier residents and the borderlands. For the borderlands to become arenas for the manifestation of state authority—a central function of any modern border—these lands had to become more the states' and less the farmers' land. Relationship to the land was fundamental to frontier residents' self-perception and a key marker of social-economic status. Adding these elements to the story changes the understanding of agency in the process of border formation and clarifies the challenges it faced. In East Germany, collectivization and the physical build-up of barriers both played major roles in transforming border residents' relationship with the land, especially during the 1960s and 70s. In the West, emigration and integration in the European market led to similar results during the same period—fewer people worked the land along the border and larger portions of the borderland lay fallow or were taken up, or at least supervised, by state organizations.

AGENCY: MAKING THE IRON CURTAIN 'FROM ABOVE' AND 'FROM BELOW'

Border formation brings state power to the fore and easily lends itself to 'top-down' analyses. Instruments of power directed by state organizations (e.g., war and

Where the World Ended: Re-Unification and Identity in the German Borderland (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999). See also a recent volume, which accompanied an exhibition, featuring short articles by some of the above-mentioned people and many others: Thomas Schwark et al. (eds), *Grenzziehungen—Grenzerfahrungen—Grenzüberschreitungen: Die innerdeutsche Grenze 1945–1990* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2011).

occupation, tariffs, roadblocks, and fences) are highly visible and command attention. As a consequence, scholars tend to perceive frontier populations as passive objects of border formation.⁵ Peter Sahlins' analysis of the development of the border between France and Spain showed that frontier populations can have considerable agency in border formation and in shaping national identifications.⁶

Assigning agency for the development of the Iron Curtain has been a contested practice in German history, especially in the past two decades. The inter-German border severed families, deprived many thousands of home and work, and claimed the health and lives of thousands more. The issue of agency carries implications of responsibility for these consequences. This partially explains the relatively long dominance of 'top-down' approaches to this border. During the Cold War, writing about the inter-German border was mostly undertaken by journalists and Western government branches. Both kinds of publications assigned primary responsibility for the division and the construction of the border to Soviet and East German state and party organizations.⁷ Since the 1980s, this one-sided story has been challenged by several scholars, who argued that decisions and policies of the Western Allies and West German governments contributed to the division of Germany.⁸ These critics share the view that the division of Germany came from the top, disputing only which state organizations carried what part of the responsibility for bringing it about.

Following the collapse of the GDR, a flurry of personal narratives with or by frontier residents and border guards were published, largely supporting the view of border construction and division as having been imposed from above. The border is portrayed in these texts as something that *happened* to frontier residents. The stories

⁵ James Anderson and Liam O'Dowd, 'Borders, Border Regions and Territoriality: Contradictory Meanings, Changing Significance', *Regional Studies* 33 (1999): 595–6.

⁶ Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 7–9, 285–6. See also Thomas Lindenberger, "Zonenrand", "Sperrgebiet" und "Westberlin": Deutschland als Grenzregion des Kalten Kriegs," in *Teilung und Integration: die doppelte deutsche Nachkriegsgeschichte als wissenschaftliches und didaktisches Problem*, edited by Christoph Kleßmann and Peter Lautzas (Bonn: BpB, 2005), 98; Caitlin E. Murdock, "The Leaky Boundaries of Man-Made States": National Identity, State Policy and Everyday Life in the Saxon-Bohemian Border Lands 1870–1938' (PhD diss., Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2003), 2–3.

⁷ Bundesministerium für Gesamtdeutsche Fragen (ed.), *Im Schatten der Zonengrenze* (Bonn, 1956); Bundesministerium für innerdeutsche Beziehungen (ed.), *Die innerdeutsche Grenze* (Bonn: Gesamtdeutsches Institut, 1987); Bundesminister des Innern (ed.), *6 Jahre Grenzkommission mit der DDR* (Bonn, 1979); Gesamtdeutsches Institut, Bundesanstalt für gesamtdeutsche Aufgaben (ed.), *Wo Deutschland geteilt ist: Beiderseits der innerdeutschen Grenze* (Bonn, 1985), David Shears, *The Ugly Frontier* (New York: Knopf, 1970), Josef Hans Sauer (ed.), *Die Rhön: Grenzland im Herzen Deutschland* (Fulda: Verlag Parzeller und Co., 1967). I thank Astrid M. Eckert for sharing with me copies of some of these publications.

⁸ Rolf Steininger, *Eine Vertane Chance: Die Stalin-Note Vom 10. März 1952 Und Die Wiedervereinigung* (Berlin: J. H. W. Dietz Nachf., 1985); Gerhard Wettig, 'Stalin and German Reunification: Archival Evidence on Soviet Foreign Policy in Spring 1952', *Historical Journal* 37 (1994): 411–19; Wilfrid Loth, *Die Sowjetunion und die deutsche Frage* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2007); Bruce Kuklick, *American Policy and the Division of Germany: The Clash with Russia over Reparations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972); Carolyn W. Eisenberg, *Drawing the Line: The American Decision to Divide Germany, 1944–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

they tell emphasize frontier residents' powerlessness in the face of these processes.⁹ Since the late 1990s, studies of the inter-German border have challenged the passivity attributed to 'ordinary Germans' in general and to residents of frontier areas in particular. The works of Daphne Berdahl and especially Edith Sheffer have carved out considerable room for manoeuvring for these frontier residents, showing that their choices and interests affected division and border formation importantly.¹⁰

Building on these efforts, *States of Division* establishes a new balance in the question of agency in the creation of the inter-German border. It lends further support to the claim that the Iron Curtain was not simply imposed from above and that frontier residents had an important role in producing the division of Germany. At the same time, it suggests that this role should be interpreted carefully. Individual choices and practices interacted with those of state organizations, acting on and reacting to them in this process. This book rejects both the 'from above' approach to agency and the reduction of the role of state organizations to just one of many agents in this process. Borders are sites of extreme significance for state organizations, and crucial elements of state building are at stake in border formation. The book explores the gradual concentration of power in the hands of state organizations as both a cause and a consequence of the solidification of the border, demonstrating the interconnectedness of state building and border formation. The actions and choices of frontier residents and administrators played a pivotal role in the creation of the Iron Curtain in Germany, but did so within limits determined in constant interaction with state agencies. Individual agency diminished over the decades, both paralleling and attesting to the progress of state building.

Frontier residents made sense of their choices in the context of their own interests and goals and acted accordingly. Their behaviours are best interpreted as representing their *Eigen-Sinn* (literally own-sense, translated also as self-will or obstinacy).¹¹ *Eigen-Sinn* connotes a broad variety of choices and practices, including those which aided ('collaboration') and others that stood in the way of ('resistance') to state organizations' intentions.¹² Such a framework highlights the reasoning of

⁹ Cornelia Röhlke (ed.), *Erzählungen von der deutsch-deutsche Grenze* (Erfurt: Sutton Verlag, 2001), 7. For other collections of interviews, stories and memoirs see: Alois Buckler, *Grenzgänger. Erlebnisse aus den Jahren 1947–1961 an der inner-deutschen Grenze* (Leipzig: Thomas Verlag, 1991); Roman Grafe (ed.), *Die Grenze durch Deutschland: Eine Chronik von 1945 bis 1990* (Berlin: Siedler, 2002); Jürgen Kleindienst (ed.), *Von hier nach drüben: Grenzgänge, Fluchten und Reisen im kalten Krieg 1945–1961* (Berlin: Zeitgut Verlag, 2001); Joachim S. Hohmann and Gerhard Grischok (eds), *Grenzland Rhön: Geschichten und Bilder aus der Zeit der Teilung* (Hünfeld: Rhön Verlag, 1997); Andreas Hartmann and Sabine Doering-Manteuffel (eds), *Grenzgeschichten: Berichte Aus Dem Deutschen Niemandsland* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1990).

¹⁰ Berdahl, *Where the World Ended*; Sheffer, *Burned Bridge*.

¹¹ The term *Eigen-Sinn* was first introduced by Alf Lüdtke in the early 1990s and has become a staple in the study of everyday life history in Germany. See Alf Lüdtke, *Eigen-Sinn: Fabrikalltag, Arbeitserfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus* (Hamburg: Ergebnisse Verlag, 1993).

¹² As elaborated by Thomas Lindenberger, the historical application of 'resistance', 'collaboration', and similar labels makes sense only in relatively rare cases. Thomas Lindenberger, 'Die Diktatur der Grenzen', in *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur*, edited by Thomas Lindenberger (Colougne, Weimar and Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1999), 23–6.