

**Gerhard Weinberg**, *Book of the Month Club*, 2011. (and *History Book Club*, *Military History Book Club*).

<http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:4aYZpvuaqFkJ:www.bomc2.com/history-books/european-books/burned-bridge-by-edith-sheffer-1072669803.html+&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>

# Book of the Month Club

## Burned Bridge

**How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain**

Edith Sheffer

011 / September 01, 2011 Publisher: Oxford University Press

□ **Editorial Review** **Review by Gerhard L. Weinberg,**

*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Both at the time and in retrospect, our image of the division of Germany into an Eastern Zone and Western Zone and subsequently into two states is a physical one. We think of the Wall in Berlin, barbed wire entanglements, death strips and other obstacles. If we think of individuals, it is border guards with their dogs and individuals trying to escape that dominate our thinking. In this remarkable book, these elements do not disappear, but they come to be dominated by the practical daily realities in the lives of Germans on both sides of the divide and the ways in which their accommodation to the division created visions and stereotypes of each other that the Germans call "Die Mauer im Kopf," the wall in the mind, that has survived the reduction of the physical wall into little pieces kept as souvenirs.

On the basis of an extraordinarily wide sweep of archives, publications and interviews, the author exemplifies the process of division and its impact on people's habits and thoughts by a focus on two small towns, Sonneberg in the East and Neustadt in the West. Ironically, the "Burned Bridge" of the title is the name of a wooden walkway across a swampy area between the two communities whose inhabitants had long interacted in all manner of familiar and economic ways. In 1945

they find themselves occupied by American and Soviet soldiers and before long divided by increasingly rigid and differentiated sets of controls.

All manner of contacts continue between the people of the two towns, but the physical constraints increase in 1952 and even more in 1961. What distinguishes this book from others that engage the division and eventual reunification of Germany is that the decisions made at the top by occupation authorities, new national governments and local authorities are examined through the daily experiences of those who have to live with them. We see accommodation and defiance, approval and disappointment, modifications on the spot and



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rigid insistence on preposterous procedures. As division increasingly looks like a permanent feature of life, those on both sides of it not only work out whatever adjustments in daily life appear most suitable to them. Perhaps in the long run more importantly, they develop images of each other that become stereotypes into which whatever happens on the other side is fitted. And when the country is reunited, these images of the other do not disappear as quickly as the physical barriers.

This clearly written book is marked by fair judgments and illuminating detail. It will provide any who read it with a new perspective on the Cold War and the postwar history of Germany. Here readers will also find a major clue to a domestic problem the Germans still have to cope with. The Austrians were indeed fortunate in keeping a form of unity after 1945 and seeing their zonal division end in 1955. This book offers a challenging preview of issues that will face Korea if it is ever again one country.

Maria C. Bagshaw, *Library Journal*, November 1, 2011.

<http://reviews.libraryjournal.com/2011/11/books/nonfic/soc-sci/social-sciences-reviews-november-1-2011/>



Sheffer, Edith. **Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain.**Oxford Univ.

2011. 356p. photogs. maps. bibliog. index. ISBN 9780199737048. \$29.95.HIST

Fifty years ago, the Soviet Union built a barrier between East and West Berlin, defining the Cold War era.

Sheffer (history, Stanford Univ.) uses primary and secondary sources, including interviews, to portray two

sister cities (Neustadt and Sonneberg) and their Iron Curtain experience. She strongly delineates how

social and psychological barriers developed and strengthened, culminating at the historical and physical

barrier at Burned Bridge, a stretch of road that connected the sister cities. This compelling history brings the

issue of the inter-German border to a more personal level: a bitter rending of twin cities, a tearing apart that

likely happened all over Germany. After the opening of Germany's internal borders in 1989, tensions arose

quickly: East Germans resented the West's privileged position, and West Germans were upset about the

invasion of their city.

**VERDICT** The romanticized version of generous Westerners and grateful, desperate Easterners is

corrected here. Sheffer shows how the barriers grew and then gave way not just to freedom but to shock

and uncertainty that is still apparent today. Any audience with an interest in this topic will find this accessible

history an excellent way to explore the impact of the Cold War experience on a population.

**Maria C. Bagshaw**

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*Publishers Weekly*, July 4, 2011 <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-19-973704-8>

## Publishers Weekly

# Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain

*Edith Sheffer. Oxford Univ., \$29.95 (384p) ISBN 978-1-19-973704-8*

Stanford assistant professor of history Sheffer has written a meticulous analysis of a social experiment that began in 1945 when Soviet troops occupied Sonneberg and Americans Neustadt, sister cities whose city halls were three miles apart. The first of the book's three sections covers 1945–1952, when the unfenced "green border" between the two cities became a "wild frontier," with so much violence and harassment that citizens themselves urged more control. From 1952 to 1961, East Germany built fences and cut transit links, actions mostly successful in confirming the cities' psychological separation. From 1961 to 1989, the border progressively hardened; Sheffer emphasizes that this occurred with little violence but much local grumbling and negotiation. Both sides preferred to avoid trouble. Easterners trying to escape were more likely to be caught by local civilians and police than border guards. Sheffer's Ph.D. thesis, although a

superior example, is lucidly written with plenty of anecdotes, but also an avalanche of statistics in the appendixes. This is serious academic research on a narrow subject that will interest serious history buffs. 34 illus. (Sept.)

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*Kirkus*, June 15, 2011 <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/edith-sheffer/burned-bridge/#review>

## Kirkus Reviews



### **BURNED BRIDGE**

How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain

By [Edith Sheffer](#) (*Author*) An accessible, intriguing academic study tracking the building of the "wall in the head" between

East and West Germany long before the actual construction in 1961.

Sheffer (History/Stanford Univ.) traces the demarcation between two adjacent towns in the middle of greater Germany, Sonneberg and Neustadt, connected by a naturally created road called Burned Bridge. Each became its own frontier and border town after the political delineations of World War II, largely through habit and ingrained mindset rather than physical restrictions. While the two German towns had always maintained their own personalities and friendly competition in the toy-making industry, after World War II, as per the zonal boundaries established by the victors, Sonneberg was incorporated into the Soviet zone, and Neustadt into the American. While the road of Burned Bridge had once served as the connection between the two, it now designated the "symbol of severance." Gradually, two separate,

mutually hostile societies grew within the respective towns, one dominated by the socialist political system, characterized by a tightly controlled economy and a censored, restricted society, the other offering democratic elections, a free market, abundant goods and services and free movement of citizens. While the border had been fairly porous immediately after the war, a growing black market and influx of refugees moving West exacerbated the tension, and both sides recognized the need for tighter controls. Through abundantly documented evidence, in the form of tidbits of small, daily social fabric delineating the ways the towns' inhabitants assimilated this partition, Sheffer reveals how an uneasy postwar society created its own "living wall." Especially chilling is the role of the Stasi— the East German Ministry for State Security—in the inculcation of neighbor spy watching and cross-border surveillance.

A methodical study of one model experiment through which the entire mindset of the Iron Curtain can be viewed.

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