

Conference Group for Central European History of the American Historical Association

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain by Edith Sheffer and Peter Schneider

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rendered justice—whatever balance was right and true in terms of war, politics, and law, Jardim has opened a rich vein of material and sketched it lucidly.

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*Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain.* By Edith Sheffer. Foreword by Peter Schneider. New York: Oxford University Press. 2011. Pp. xx1 + 357. Cloth \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-19-973704-8.

The Berlin Wall has come to symbolize the division of Europe, and of Germany, during the Cold War; its erection is taken to reflect the capriciousness and violence of the state socialist regimes, its fall the moment of liberation from dictatorship. The value of Sheffer's book lies in the way it turns from symbolism and high politics to the actual function of a border in everyday life. Instead of looking at Berlin, Sheffer shifts attention to the border between Bavaria and Thuringia, and the two sister cities Neustadt and Sonneberg, interlinked sites of toy production connected by a small bridge originally made of charred wood that would become the borderland between eastern and western Europe. Certainly big power politics shaped the development of this border; but, the book convincingly shows, local people also acted on their own to shape, to give meaning to, even to demand a wall between east and west. That "wall" remains, both politically and psychologically, even decades after the unification of East and West Germany.

The details matter in a history such as this one, and Sheffer has assiduously combed through fifteen archives and dozens of newspapers in addition to carrying out some fifty interviews with local residents and gaining access to the private papers of twenty-four of them. In addition, she mailed out a detailed survey to 500 residents of the two cities selected at random. With this impressive database, she is able to reconstruct not only the details of events that remain in people's minds, but also those that largely disappeared from public memory. Her book organizes these details in three temporal parts.

Between 1945 and 1952, the populations on both sides of the border experienced the chaos and violence of postwar occupation as well as the process of forming new states. Rape, robbery, and murder were part of both occupation regimes at first, though they persisted in the east for a longer time. And the border aggravated the problems: Sheffer shows how either side of the border became a site of violence, especially by the Soviet soldiers, how reports of

bodies found—of women raped and then shot—appeared in newspapers through 1947. Smuggling in both directions developed as well as did movement of refugees in both directions, but especially toward the west. No wonder, then, that the physical border “expanded in people’s imaginations—and concentrated postwar anxieties” (p. 47): it was not merely symbolic of disorder, it was a means of disorder. The 1947 currency reforms increased the profitability of smuggling and prefigured the 1949 formation of two separate states. Both east and west made use of unification rhetoric, especially when it came to recruiting or retaining skilled workers. Both worked to consolidate the border, especially when it came to excluding undesirable elements of the population. Sheffer points out well how the SED manipulated public opinion with soccer games between the cities on each side of the border, how it even organized mass crossings of citizens from the east to the west; these crossings, however, took on a life of their own, leading to attempts to bring them to a halt by both the East German People’s Police and Bavarian authorities. For both sides, the border was intended to bring order; for both sides, it brought continued disorder, “violence, smuggling, migration, and political hostilities” (p. 94). The border helped to produce the very problems that would lead officials to strengthen it.

Sheffer deftly connects the local history of the border with the related histories of East and West Germany. In the east, for example, consolidation of the socialist regime made stronger border controls even more necessary, at the least to control the flight of skilled workers. The attempt to seal the border from the east in spring 1952 was accompanied by mass deportations inland of supposedly unreliable elements of the population. The narrative reminds one of some of the forced migrations of the 1930s, not only in its arbitrary nature but also in its lack of planning and unintended consequences, as one village, for example, simply chose to relocate to the west. The next nine years saw continuing migrations westward, though now often through Berlin, and an ever more complex system of surveillance, special passports, and regulations on border communities, all designed to halt border movements. The consolidation of the Stasi was closely related to the need to monitor the population in the east and the concern over espionage from the west. And the population often collaborated in these regime practices in exchange for special payments or privileges.

The final section of the book deals with the period after the construction of the Berlin Wall, when the border between Sonneberg and Neustadt was mined and more tightly controlled than before. While exchanges persisted, they were more limited; between 1961 and 1989, the two sides became ever more distinct and distant. The closed border certainly managed conflict between east and west during the Cold War; it also resulted in social differences that would make themselves manifest in the period after German Unification, when increased contact resulted paradoxically in increased estrangement. “Ironically,” Sheffer writes,

“Sonnebergers and Neustadters appeared most at odds when the border was open and felt closest when it was closed” (p. 249).

Going far beyond attempts to get at Cold-War culture through abstract statistics, political histories, or displays of consumer goods, this study reveals the Cold War as a lived experience. It succeeds well in connecting the Cold War as a process in international relations with the life of the people at its front.

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*The Firm: The Inside Story of the Stasi.* By Gary Bruce. New York: Oxford University Press. 2010. Pp. 264. Cloth \$34.95. ISBN 978-0195392050. Paper \$24.95. ISBN 978-0199896578.

Gary Bruce's *The Firm: The Inside Story of the Stasi* is a well-written look inside the Ministry for State Security (MfS, or Stasi) of East Germany. Combining archival research with extensive interviews, *The Firm* focuses in particular on two Stasi district offices, in Perleberg and in Gransee, north of Berlin. Neither district was in theory terribly crucial to the GDR's national security, though Perleberg did abut West Germany—this is not a cloak-and-dagger narrative about espionage in East Berlin. It is the very quotidian nature of Perleberg and Gransee, however, that allows us to formulate a new set of questions about the Stasi than have previously been asked: how did the Stasi function in everyday life, apart from hotbeds of dissidence or Cold-War intrigue?

Indeed, what is striking about Bruce's study of the two districts is just how interpenetrated the Stasi was in everyday life in these places where there did not seem to be a pressing need for state security. In particular, Bruce's work is illuminating when he discusses the vast network of informers recruited by the Stasi, as well as when he explores the internal culture of camaraderie that was created and sustained within the “Firm.”

The first piece of this picture is Bruce's discussion of the methods used by the Stasi to build their ranks. First of all, as Bruce notes, one did not apply to join the Stasi—one had to be asked to apply for candidacy by the Stasi themselves. They had a profile of the type of person they wanted: the person should ideally be from a working-class background but show ambition, and his/her background needed to be free of any political suspicion, such as past association with anticommunism or relatives in the west. More than that, though, the ideal candidate was a model of “mainstream” East German culture. Any questionable character traits or nonconformist behavior (excessive drinking, womanizing, homosexuality, drug use,