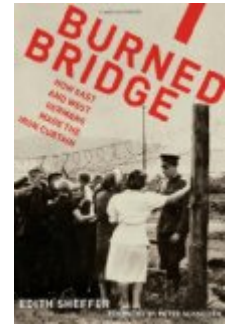


Edith Sheffer. *Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 357 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-973704-8.

Reviewed by Ulf Zimmermann (Kennesaw State University)

Published on H-German (June, 2013)

Commissioned by Shannon Nagy



Building the Wall in the Head

It is appropriate that Edith Sheffer's in-depth study of the divide between East and West Germans begins with a foreword by Peter Schneider, because when his novel *The Wall Jumper* (1983) appeared thirty years ago, he first identified this "wall in the head" that is the subject of her research. She covers the construction of this wall in three parts: first, in the head from the end of the war up to 1952, when a first real border was built; second, the ideological construction of a "living wall" between 1952 and 1961; and third, the very real "Iron Curtain" wall from 1961 to 1989. To this she adds a nice epilogue on what remains of that "wall in the head."

"Burned Bridge" refers to a short span of road between two adjacent German towns, Neustadt and Sonneberg, that consists of logs charred to resist rot; they were placed in that location to bridge the marsh there. For a millennium or more, these towns, along with a handful of villages around and between them, were essentially part of one greater community—their residents intermarried, spoke the same dialect, cooked the same traditional dishes, and labored in the same toy industry. But because of decisions made on high after World War II, these two towns ended up on different sides of a border instituted by the Allied powers. It is worth noting that there was at least some logic to this decision: shifting ducal and provincial borders existed between the two over the centuries, and following World War I, Sonneberg was absorbed into the newly created state of Thuringia while Neustadt went to Bavaria. And while the towns' residents were over 95 percent Protestant, there had al-

ready long been contrasting stereotypes—"the provincial, easygoing Neustadters versus industrious, reserved Sonnebergers" (p. 19). Sheffer also notes that "Neustadters had long spent their paychecks in Sonneberg, enjoying its better appointed shops and entertainment, while Sonnebergers had frequently gone on weekend excursions in Neustadt, enjoying its better-situated hiking, hunting, swimming, and beer gardens" (pp. 45-46).

This came to an end, though, as the Americans and Soviets began to enlist their respective locals to mark the border with wooden posts and guards. At this point, the border was not closed, but most residents of both towns chose to stop crossing it. Thus the Cold War divide began to set in. Marshall Plan aid benefited the Westerners and the currency reform of 1948 brought a lot of Easterners across the border for black marketeering, and both strongly reinforced the stereotypes of the "impoverished East" versus the "promised land" of the West. Neustadters eventually began enforcing the law and arrested many Sonnebergers. This is the sort of archival material that Sheffer has used well to give us a trenchant "on-the-ground" everyday history of this "wall construction" process. For example, she documents that over 90 percent of court defendants were Easterners who had crossed for economic reasons. They had lost their export market and hence could sell their goods—or work remuneratively—only in Neustadt at this time. And of course many of the Sonnebergers who did cross did not return.

But the ones who did return every day were also a problem in that they constantly saw economic progress in the West, which was entirely and embarrassingly eluding the East. It was this visible difference that finally led the Eastern regime to seal the border with barbed wire fences and to sever all transit links in June 1952. For Sheffer, this marks “a critical turning point in German division, if not *the* turning point” (p. 97). East Germany used frontier residents to build fences and to patrol them. And its rulers also rewarded those who denounced anyone who spoke ill of the regime. To prevent the spread of such criticism, the regime instituted *Aktion Ungeziefer* (Operation Vermin) that shipped all border residents deemed “vermin” to farther inland locations.

The two states made the border into a bulwark each against the other, or, as Jakob Kaiser, West Germany’s minister for all-German questions observed, “the border population is to be made into a living wall” (p. 121). And the border was now taken seriously, if sometimes absurdly so. When one Neustadter’s puppy ran across the border the owner was interrogated for twelve hours.

While Neustadt was not exactly a plum Western location (some referred to the area as the Bavarian Siberia), its residents did not need to be paid or policed more to stay there as in Sonneberg. East German authorities had to pay a 15 percent salary supplement to get their border residents to do anything for them. Living at the border also meant that they were permanently suspect and hence all the more watched. Residents got so used to being spied on that the Stasi wound up complaining how hard it was to infiltrate any group in Sonneberg. These bizarre circumstances were, moreover, loaded with even stranger ironies. For example, the Eastern regime needed to keep the desirable population, and local functionaries accordingly bent over backward to keep their doctors, engineers, and other trained personnel in the East. This prompted many Sonnebergers to float rumors that they were leaving. Authorities quickly offered perks, say, a better apartment, to stay. This, in turn, created more work for the Stasi, which had to investigate whether these individuals really did plan to leave. And anyone who could manipulated this system. Similarly, former residents who returned to Sonneberg were well treated, which likewise led a good number of them to leave and then to return for greater perks (although they were often relocated farther inland).

Once the actual Berlin Wall was built, as Sheffer writes in part 3, people generally resigned themselves to the life available to them, which led to an economic up-

swing. Despite this upswing, consumer goods were in short supply, leaving Sonnebergers to often spend their 15 percent border bonus on beer: Sonneberg achieved the highest beer consumption in all of East Germany. As more travel was permitted, Sonnebergers doubtless found even more reason to drink because it seemed that most visitors from the West were former Sonnebergers who could now afford to come back to their old hometown in their new Mercedes—and they could afford to buy luxuries there (silver, porcelain, fancy glass items) that the locals decidedly could not afford. These substantial material differences further aggravated social differences. These contrasts were even more visible when some Sonnebergers were allowed to go to Neustadt and witness firsthand the prosperity, with everything freshly painted, clean, and new (as even seasoned Stasi informants attested). With Easterners coming back from such travels ever more dissatisfied, the eventual migration that began in 1989 is all the less surprising. When Hungary opened its border to Austria in May, dozens of Sonneberg families headed out and by October county officials were granting emigration applications to anyone who showed up.

When the infamous Wall was gone, as Sheffer aptly notes in her epilogue, the wall in the head emerged. As the world that had been familiar to the “Ossis” completely disappeared around them, they were exposed as “Third World” natives and “colonized” by the “Wessis, and they were embarrassed to have to admit that they’d been happy to ‘live in a cage’” (p. 246). Of course as it turned out, the West was neither as Edenic or charitable as many Easterners might have imagined, and equally the Easterners were not nearly as enthusiastic or thankful as Westerners might have expected.

Thus rather than cooperating on anything, the two towns became more competitive—instead of a large central mall, say, on a “burned bridge,” each town built its own on either side. The wall in the head manifested itself in almost amusing other ways as well. Teenagers surveyed in 2005 thought Neustadters were arrogant and Sonnebergers dumb; only 35 percent of them would date someone from the other side. And, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Wall, each town held its own celebration.

Apart from having provided this excellent ethnographic (and psychographic) historical account of both walls, Sheffer has also drawn some apt conclusions and rightly alarming comparisons. While she notes that, as subsequent events in the former Yugoslavia bore out, this

Cold War Wall essentially kept a lid on serious violence in Europe, she also suggests what it signifies for the many other walls we have built around the world today. While the European Union has indeed eliminated internal borders, it has all the more fortified its external ones—keep those “others” out. Such walls have a long tradition—China’s, Hadrian’s—but we do not seem to have learned much from their human costs or eventual fates, and so we continue to build them, whether it is a “security fence” in Israel or a similarly obscene structure along the Mexican-U.S. border.

While we know why Easterners behaved the way that they did, “caged” as they were, why free Westerners behaved in a similar way is not made clear. And while this

may not be a historian’s answer, here I would offer the familiar notion that what comes first, that is, what is closest to us, is our “tribe,” the “in-group” with which we share the most. We tend to be strongly motivated to conform to what our role models do and we are powerfully subject to peer pressure. These factors transcend any of the sober “realities” about the similarities between the Neustadters and Sonnebergers. Despite what one of Sheffer’s many interviewees said, the residents of the two towns were never really “one heart and one soul” (p. 3). As the epilogue shows, the “othering” process, the building of the “wall in the head” that was little more than half joking in the past, has escalated to new heights twenty years after the fall of the real Wall.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Ulf Zimmermann. Review of Sheffer, Edith, *Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36603>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.