

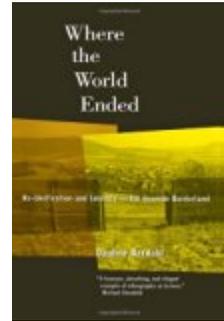
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daphne Berdahl. *Where the World Ended: Re-Unification and Identity in the German Borderland*. New York and London: University of California Press, 1999. xiii + 204 pp. \$17.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-21477-4.

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## The Texture of Transition in the East German Borderland

The Texture of Transition in the East German Borderland

November 9 of this year marks the tenth anniversary of the political unification of East and West Germany, but it has become clear that the legal absorption of the GDR into the Federal Republic was only the first step in an open-ended and contested process. Whether real or invented, the “wall in the mind” separating the two populations still exerts considerable force at many levels of German society. Cultural division and the legacy of state socialism in the GDR remain topics of constant and often heated commentary. The problem of unification has also generated a number of sociological, historical, and ethnographic studies on “life in the GDR” and “East German identity,” but few of these works offer the fine-grained yet encompassing account found in Daphne Berdahl’s recently published study.

*Where the World Ended* examines how the residents of Kella, an East German village formerly located in the GDR’s highly restricted border zone, negotiated multiple forms of marginality and change in the transition from state socialism to the West German order. As a constant and imposing presence, the border acquired a multitude of practical and metaphorical meanings for villagers and gave their experiences of socialism and subsequent transformations exceptionally tangible points of reference.

Based primarily on field research conducted from 1990 to 1992, Berdahl’s study offers intimate accounts of

the personal and the local while effectively situating the view from below among the forces originating from beyond this formerly isolated village. The book’s presentation, methods, and theoretical categories reflect established traditions in socio-cultural anthropology: Berdahl applies familiar theories of symbolism, rites of passage, and social distinction, for example, in ways that remind us of their enduring utility.

The book is divided into seven chapters covering distinct aspects of village life: after situating Kella historically and geographically, Berdahl proceeds through issues of politics, religion, consumption, unification, gender, and memory. Her treatment of these topics succeeds, however, in revealing the complex intersections among these areas. Themes of everyday engagement with power, the symbolism and politics of belonging, and the negotiation of abrupt cultural and social change carry through these sections.

Many of the book’s most engaging moments occur in Berdahl’s descriptions of villagers’ ongoing construction and revision of symbols that express local forms of engagement with larger forces. She describes, for example, how the smocks worn by women villagers before 1989, abandoned thereafter, and then adopted again reflected shifting bodily practices with respect to both gender and East German identity (pp. 203-204). Formerly standard attire for working women in the GDR, the smock was no longer “modern” once it became a de facto emblem of

Easternness, but some women soon wore them again after having reflected on the practice in conversations with Berdahl. Here, as elsewhere in the book, the ethnographer is present in the narrative. Berdahl remains carefully attuned to the influence of her presence and work on her subjects.

Villagers' responses to the imposing presence and sudden disappearance of the border contributes a great deal to our understanding of why so many East Germans rushed to embrace the West in 1989 but soon voiced regrets about the erosion of security and solidarity associated with the GDR. However much nostalgia may play a role here, it is apparent that the disappearance of the border and socialist regime, along with institutions like the local suspender clip factory that provided women with ongoing social contact as well as income, have altered the character of social relationships in Kella. Berdahl further demonstrates how the "transition" has inspired practices of identification that place the residents of Kella somewhere between, in many ways even somewhere beyond East and West, socialism and capitalism, nostalgia and adaptation.

Although Kella was no paradise of solidarity before unification, its isolation did nurture a sense of togetherness through adversity and opposition. Bounded on the west by heavily guarded fences, the village found itself on the extreme frontier of the GDR, but it also remained isolated from the rest of East Germany. Limitations on residence and travel in the border zone placed the village on a veritable island with only a single, unmarked road connecting it to the rest of the GDR. Moreover, Kella belongs to a devout Catholic enclave, which isolated it culturally from surrounding Protestants and placed practicing Catholics in an uneasy relationship with the officially atheistic socialist state. Berdahl thus describes Kella's borderland condition as a state of marginality, but also emphasizes that border zones, as sites of intense investment and confrontation, allow both residents and researchers to see the workings of social and political forces with special clarity (pp. 8-9).

One of Berdahl's most illuminating arguments concerns how Kella's inhabitants responded to the socialist regime with a variety of strategies to "negotiate the limits of the possible and, in so doing, helped define them" (p. 8). By combining constant visibility and pervasive secrecy with inconsistent applications of power, the state forced citizens to interpret its intentions for themselves and test the limits of the possible on its terms, producing an internalized surveillance of the sort described by

Michel Foucault.[1] A cultivated "mystique of the unknown" effectively inspired them to invest the state with an "exaggerated aura of power and knowledge" (pp. 45-46). Villagers nevertheless developed their own tactics of evasion, subversion, and complicity, but Berdahl shows that few of their actions fit neatly into the categories of opposition or collaboration. Individual biographies reveal that the post-unification search for heroes and villains inevitably oversimplifies the messy realities. Furthermore, the question of how groups imagine and navigate the limits of the possible provides us with an especially useful means of understanding not just life under repressive regimes, but the nature of hegemony and resistance in many other contexts.

Yet here, as in other sections, Kella ultimately appears in many ways unexceptional despite its borderland status. I suspect that research in other villages and towns in the former GDR could have imaginably prompted similar findings. The boundary motif is thus not equally illuminating in all parts of the book: at times it expands to encompass so many phenomena that it loses definition, while at others its relevance remains unclear. Although Berdahl's discussions of identity perceptively address the everyday negotiation of various social and cultural boundaries, the ways this occurs in Kella often reflect conditions not wholly peculiar to its borderland situation.

At the same time, Kella's proximity to the border did confront villagers with conditions that differed in intensity if not fundamentally in kind from those affecting other East Germans. It certainly provided for a number of highly revealing moments: buses regularly brought tourists to a hill on the western side, for example, from which they could peer down upon the village. "It not only provided a place for former residents to look to," Berdahl writes, "often through binoculars, in the hope of recognizing a familiar face but also turned Kella and the socialist East in general into a spectacle, a tourist site to be viewed from the 'safety' of the West" (pp. 149-150). This exchange of gazes captures nicely the kind of "mirror imagining" described by John Borneman as central to the dynamic of Cold War identity formation between East and West Germany.[2]

This ethnography will undoubtedly prove valuable to anyone concerned with contemporary Germany and transformations in former socialist states in Europe. The clarity of Berdahl's writing and argumentation also makes this book quite suitable for undergraduate courses. *Where the World Ended* may not provoke many

drastic revisions in our understanding of the GDR and postsocialist transformations in East Germany, but it does force poignant qualifications to standard assumptions about East Germany and unification with an encompassing, textured, and sensitive description of *how* these structures and conditions were lived on a day to day basis.

#### Notes

[1]. Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth*

*of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

[2]. John Borneman. *Belonging in the Two Berlins: Kin, State, and Nation*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

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