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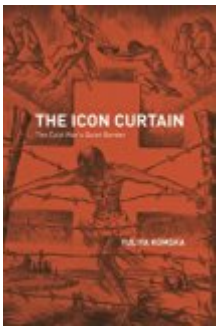


**Yuliya Komska.** *The Icon Curtain: The Cold War's Quiet Border.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 288 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-15419-0.

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Yuliya Komska's *The Icon Curtain: The Cold War's Quiet Border* is an intriguing, interdisciplinary study of the particular contours and content of a discrete, less known segment of the Iron Curtain. She focuses on the short stretch of divided Europe's Cold War barrier located at the Federal Republic of Germany's eastern frontier--not along the inter-German border, but just to the west of the West German-Czechoslovak divide. Komska, assistant professor of German studies at Dartmouth University, points out that prior to the Second World War this forested terrain had a lively presence in the experiences and imaginations of Central Europeans. After the war, memories of this borderlands region transcended the temporal 1945 dividing line, helping to endow this 220-mile-long sylvan stretch of the 4,350-mile-long Iron Curtain with local meaning, making it more than an impenetrable military stronghold.

Sudeten Germans, the main protagonists of Komska's book, played a leading role in the West German-Czechoslovak border's history as "a site of bustling creative activities" (p. 4). Before World War II many of their homes were in the western edges of Czechoslovakia and their bards left a rich tradition of homeland (***Heimat***) literature celebrating those homes. Once the war ended, they were expelled from Czechoslovakia under the terms of the Beneš Decrees, resulting in more than a million Sudeten-Germans migrating to and resettling in the Federal Republic, primarily in Bavaria. They brought with them few material goods and a wealth of beliefs, including strong Catholic faith and a robust ***Heimat*** tradition that celebrated rootedness in one's homeland.

Unlike German expellees from Poland and elsewhere, in the Federal Republic of Germany the Sudeten Germans had access to the border of their original homeland. This proximity enabled them to observe and respond to postwar transformations along the frontier, including the unsettling replacement of familiar, visible built environments that evoked a strong sense of belonging with a new, hardly intimate no-man's-land and deteriorated towns resettled with unrooted populations. Komska argues that these Sudeten Ger-

man observations and creative efforts "endowed them with a sense of agency" (p. 8).

Komska draws upon a rich array of cultural artifacts in order to present her argument about the distinct character of the stretch of Cold War divide at the West German-Czechoslovak border. Her sources include Sudeten-German homeland leaflets (***Heimatblätter***), comparative photographs, fragments of discarded church art, poetry, Cold War travel writings, and civilian lookout towers. Like other innovative Cold War studies, she demonstrates that, in addition to diplomatic negotiations and military infrastructure, the not-so-iron Iron Curtain was made from "creative civilian responses to the division of the continent" (p. 3). This work expands knowledge of the deep genealogy of the Iron Curtain which, as the author states, "did not materialize in the middle of nowhere, being grafted with some exceptions, onto borders previously in existence" (p. 8), and it advances "understanding of the Iron Curtain as a set of 'regional subsystems'" (p. 10).

Komska provides a specific name for the section of the Iron Curtain lining the inside of West Germany's border with socialist Czechoslovakia, calling it the "prayer wall" (***Gebetswall***), a term repeatedly used in her text. In her introduction she gives an idea of this construction project. She writes, "Staunch Catholics and churchgoers, our protagonists recorded instances of Eastern Bloc iconoclasm, weaving the ensuing legends of defaced images into the fabric of popular piety along the West's margin. Pilgrims and tourists, they revised regional traffic patterns and helped sculpt the border's contours by buttressing its western side with new Catholic shrines and their secular extensions" (p. 4). The usefulness of this intriguing term, and the term "icon curtain" gracing the book's cover, can sometimes be questioned when reading the book's four main chapters. Readers might also wonder if Komska would argue that Sudeten Germans ever deliberately worked to create the "prayer wall" or that this local construction project along the Cold War strategic barrier unintentionally emerged as Sudeten Germans spontaneously responded to forced migration from and atheism in Czechoslovakia.

Chapter 1, "Conditions: Ruins of the Cold War," centers around a 1959 photo book. Ernst Bartl, a German newspaper editor from the Czechoslovak border town of Eger/Cheb, created this trilingual work, ***Egerland Once and Now***, filled with hundreds of images. Photos of ruins and rubble were selected and arranged to provide pictorial evidence of the Sudetenland's decline and decay after the expulsion of Czechoslovakia's Germans. In this chapter Komska often uses the term "prayer wall," but does not describe it or demonstrate its substance. On its final page we learn that Bartl's book entailed the repurposing of images that were not made from scratch. The prayer wall, too, was made of repurposed images. Komska writes, "[W]ithout repurposing, as we will see, neither the icon curtain nor its consolidation into the continuous prayer wall would have been possible" (p. 65).

At the start of Chapter 2, "Cornerstones: Iconoclasm and the Making of the Prayer Wall," Komska provides a well-chosen photograph from the Czechoslovak border town of Eger/Cheb of a smiling man pushing a cart filled with discarded church statuary, including Jesus figures with outstretched arms. The photo is "a rough-hewn vignette of the strained religious life in Eastern Europe's Communist borderlands in the 1950s" (p. 67), where sacred sites were destroyed or left to decay in a party state that discouraged religious belief and practice. She describes how pieces of discarded church art from the Sudetenland found their way to the western side of the Bavarian-Bohemian divide, where they were repurposed in places and practices that resulted in the creation of the prayer wall.

The migration and resettlement of two particular statues across the Iron Curtain are discussed at length in chapter 2. One was a relatively intact

Madonna from a Bohemian chapel found under mysterious circumstances in 1950 on the western side of the border. The other was a severely damaged Jesus figure which a Bavarian border guard took from a roadblock at "an opportune moment" after watching Czech border guards treating it with "sacrilegious intent" (p. 94). Both the "expelled Madonna" (p. 85) and the "mutilated savior" (p. 100) were placed in Bavarian sites of worship and became destinations of expellee pilgrimages. One wonders about other discarded church art that migrated from the East and resettled in the West. "There were too many examples to catalogue," Komska writes (p. 80). Providing more details about some of these numerous examples could offer readers clearer understanding of the prayer wall's substance, including its composition and density.

In chapter 3, "Infrastructure: Civilian Border Travel and Travelogues," Komska uses Sudeten German borderland reports, including Hugo Geiger's ***The Economic and Social Situation in the Bavarian and Bohemian Forests after World War II*** (1949), to discuss encounters with the West German-Czechoslovak frontier during the 1950s. Komska's analysis reveals ambiguous understanding among expelled Sudeten German visitors to the region of the Cold War's true nature. What sort of phenomenon was this rivalry when the beauty and serenity of the forests surrounding the Iron Curtain contrasted with the bleak military and surveillance strongholds lining the divide? Komska writes, "To integrate vignettes of war/border with those of peace/nature was one of the writers' prime challenges" (p. 129). She concludes that "Instead of cementing an unambiguous separation between East and West, Sudeten German accounts of borderland travel muddled it," thereby challenging "the [Cold War] era's bipolar mindset" (p. 177).

At the end of Chapter 4, "Uses: Visual Nostalgia at the Prayer Wall," Komska takes her reader to the ***Heimat*** Tower opened in 1961 in the West German border town of Neualbenreuth. Its proximity to the Sudetenland and its octagonal viewing platform, equipped with telescopes and brass plaques naming sites seen from individual windows, afforded expellee visitors views across the Iron Curtain into their old homeland. Using a combination of poetry and other artifacts, she argues that what gazers saw was "a bifocal structure of the borderland's visual economy" in which seeing was a complex result of physicality mixing with memory and longing for the past (p. 180).

Komska states that the Neualbenreuth ***Heimat*** Tower and other civilian viewing sites were "secular extensions of the prayer wall [that] reinforced its order" (p. 180). This statement and the evidence behind it help to confirm that a unique set of physical and cultural structures intersected at the West German-Czechoslovak frontier, making this stretch of the Iron Curtain a particular sub-system worthy of study and appreciation. It also suggests that "prayer wall" might not be the best label for capturing and conveying its construction, content, and meaning, as the particular substance of this stretch of memory and history might have resulted from more than religious identities and aspirations.

A number of scholarly audiences will find reading Komska's ***The Icon Curtain*** to be worthwhile and rewarding. Among others, this book is recommended to historians of postwar Czechoslovakia and Germany who focus on Sudeten Germans or Central European borderlands; experts in the construction and character of borders during the Cold War and in other contexts; researchers interested in methods for the study of narrative, memory, and material culture; and analysts seeking to understand ways in which people cope with the trauma of forced migration. Theoretically informed students and practitioners of heritage tourism will also find much of interest in this enriching, provocative study of culture and the local construction of the Iron Curtain.

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