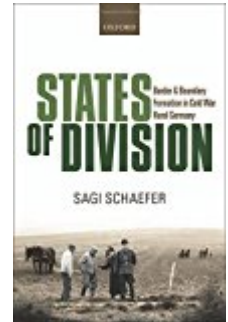


Sagi Schaefer. *States of Division: Border and Boundary Formation in Cold War Rural Germany.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 288 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-967238-7.



Reviewed by Yuliya Komska

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (June, 2015)

“The farmers cultivate the land, we cultivate the farmers. That is the cultural revolution.” Heiner Müller, *Die Umsiedlerin oder das Leben auf dem Lande*, Die Stücke 1, Frankfurt am Main 2000, p. 206. The line from Heiner Müller’s play “The Resettler Woman, Or Life in the Countryside” (1961), draws a poignant image of East German collectivization in the late 1940s. However, the fact that Müller reached for this material in the late 1950s and saw the play’s premiere fall prey to the communist censors in September 1961 (a mere month after the Berlin Wall was constructed) attests to the topic’s persistent link to the much more protracted state-building processes. Indeed, land, as Sagi Schaefer argues in “States of Division: Border and Boundary Formation in Cold War Rural Germany” remains the neglected crux in the story of Germany’s Cold War division – and not only in the East. His book, a revised dissertation defended at Columbia University in 2011, aims to rectify this omission. To this end, Schaefer places the Eichsfeld, a partitioned rural Catholic enclave in Germany’s heartland, at the center of the account that marries agricultural and economic histories with the documentation of

border formation on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

The choice of the Eichsfeld is not coincidental. Schaefer’s narrative scripts an overdue prelude to Daphne Berdahl’s vibrant ethnography of post-socialist transition in Kella; just one of the divided region’s villages. Daphne Berdahl, *On the Social Life of Postsocialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany*, ed. by Matti Bunzl, Bloomington 2010. To Berdahl’s cultural-anthropological analysis, rooted in the interviews and observations from the 1990s, Schaefer adds several leads to the developments during the four preceding decades.

Some of his additions are methodological. Among these, social scientists’ long-established interest in social structures and relations between them looms large. From this vantage point, the arc of Schaefer’s argument captures one particularly significant turnaround: the slow waning of the Eichsfeld’s age-old cross-border kinship and the rise, in its place, of various new institutions (such as border patrol agencies) integral to the two border-building German states. In a nutshell, his is a story of how emergent statehood east and

west of the inter-German border gradually eroded the sense of regional identity, held together by familial ties and land-tilling practices. The reason, Schaefer proposes, was that for both states observing symbolic political gestures took precedence over taking care of the borderland residents' actual livelihoods.

Initially, these people profited from their inter-zonal location, a paradise for mercantile caniness, but in the long run, they were among the border's biggest losers. In the East, the mainly smallholding farmers lost to the deportation of the politically "unreliable" and then to the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) land grab. In the West, their comparable peers suffered from the frequent lack of any compensation for the land they had once owned behind the border. The most palpable result was the region's slow but steady agricultural decline on both sides. It went hand-in-hand with population attrition (part forced, part voluntary), with the eventual acceptance of the status quo by the remaining residents, and with the birth of the so-called "economic calamity zones," as such areas became known in the West. In the Eichsfeld, politics long vied for primacy with everyday life – and finally won.

Schaefer's other interventions relate to the book's geographical scope. Rather than taking just one settlement as its centerpiece – a model adopted by Berdahl as much as by such historians as Edith Sheffer in "Burned Bridge" Edith Sheffer, *Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain*, Oxford 2011. and Jason Johnson in his yet unpublished dissertation "Dividing Mödlareuth" Jason Johnson, *Dividing Mödlareuth: The Incorporation of Half a German Village into the GDR Regime, 1945–1989*, Illinois 2011. , Schaefer's analysis turns to an entire region.

The benefits of this broader base echo Schaefer's methodology. The agency of "ordinary Germans," which he pushes back against the main

thrust of Sheffer's book, was significant but ultimately limited. Consequently, the region's Cold War transformation, much of which hinged on the stature of agriculture and land ownership, crystallized only in negotiations (or lack thereof) between multiple types of actors. These ranged from individual and regional to provincial, state, and even international, if one registers both Germanys as distinct political players. All of them get a hearing in "States of Division". This said, the nuances of Schaefer's study appear to confirm that microhistory – whether narrowly or broadly defined – remains a lens far more revealing for the study of the Iron Curtain than this border's totalizing master narrative would be.

In line with other recent scholarly writings about the Iron Curtain – and in contradistinction to this border's appearances in the media – Schaefer is more interested in the process of its construction than in the outcome. Those who open his book to look for stories about the menacing barrier will be justly disappointed. Instead, they will find a scrupulous account of the things lost to the border's cementing as well as of the main gain on the states' behalf: security and political stability.

It is then hardly surprising that one of the author's main emphases, in resonance with Sheffer's account, is the extended duration of the border-formation period. In his chronology, 1952, when the inter-German border was officially closed and fortified, was only the beginning. Schaefer's descriptions of the residents' dogged resistance to the interference of state-building in private lives (illegal border-crossing, smuggling, or unsanctioned field rental that persisted over much of the 1950s and into 1960s) offer 1972 as a more viable caesura. That year, the Basic Treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the GDR normalized their relations, ensured mutual recognition, and stabilized the partition between the two countries.

In the light of the twenty-year-long time lapse between 1952 and 1972, the attendant process of “cultivating” farmers into the two states’ citizens appears similarly gradual. Rather than being disciplined or coerced into submission in a top-down manner, the locals, Schaefer proposes, slowly resigned to their circumstances and put down their arms.

The book’s five chapters re-envision other widely accepted caesuras of mid- to late-twentieth-century history of German division. Instead of 1945, 1952, and 1961, Schaefer advances the currency reform of 1948 as a pivotal state- and border-building moment next to 1972. These two dates punctuate the account of the border that was both Germanys’ engine of economic division and, up to a point, a versatile tool in negotiations between individuals and regional as well as state authorities.

The resulting narrative yields several important insights. Firstly, it contributes to a clearer picture of just how extensively the FRG contributed to the border that it did not even recognize until the early 1970s. Secondly, it brackets the Cold War’s proverbial East-West antagonism in favor of fleshing out the jarring contradictions and embittered conflicts between each German state and its citizens. Thirdly, it underscores the differences between the division’s impact on the borderlands’ residents and their respective country’s inland population. From this perspective, the terms “Easterners” and “Westerners” appear to be gross generalizations.

A few points would have merited additional work. Firstly, about half of the book is dedicated to the early 1950s, when locals still profited from divisions. The emphasis on the formative era is understandable, yet it gives short shrift to the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, when the border had a much more forcefully negative impact on the residents’ lives. Secondly, Schaefer argues for religion’s “marginal” relevance to border formation (p. 15). Despite this assertion, confessional refer-

ences arise persistently throughout the text, be it in discussions of the area’s Protestant minority (pp. 65–66) or the extensive net of western clerical contact networks exported to the East in the 1970s and 1980s (p. 183). Rather than dismissing religion as a salient factor, the author would have done better to tease out its exact relationship to the area’s economic structures, thus opening his account to a more interdisciplinary audience than the one it currently targets. Thirdly, the book tends to isolate the Eichsfeld from other such borderlands. Comparisons and contrasts to other areas (where the FRG bordered on the GDR or other Eastern-bloc countries) would have supported the case for this region’s uniqueness or, on the contrary, exemplarity. Finally, the introduction highlights a considerable number of critical terms, such as “effects of a state,” “Eigen-Sinn,” or the distinction between border and boundary. However, such terminology is only rarely taken up in the body of the book. Bringing the theoretical framework to bear on the documents in a more consistent way, rather than leaving the reader to his or her own devices with the frontloaded concepts would have rendered such scaffolds more functional and the discussion deeper.

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Citation: Yuliya Komska. Review of Schaefer, Sagi. *States of Division: Border and Boundary Formation in Cold War Rural Germany*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. June, 2015.

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