

„We live at the world’s end”: Spatial experiences of infrastructural disruptions along the inner German Border, 1950-1990.

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Abstract: While much has been said and written about the inner-German border, this year's 60th anniversary of the construction of the Wall does not suggest a premature end to this development. The still virulent research on cross-border infrastructure is no exception, as mobility infrastructure in particular materializes political processes and creates long-term spatial path dependencies in a unique way. In the case of the inner-German division, mobility infrastructures that had been used as a given were suddenly interrupted by the drawing of a political border - the infrastructural exclusion of large groups of people from having access to certain places became the rule, the connection an exception.

Residents of formerly closely socially and infrastructural connected spaces along the newly created border suddenly found themselves on the territorial periphery of newly defined states. On the eastern side, a five-kilometer-wide restricted area was established, which could be entered only by residents and permit holders. On the western side, a "Zonenrandgebiet" (zonal border area) was created that, despite a not inconsiderable amount of border tourism and numerous state subventions, was perceived by local politicians and residents as being cut off from traffic and thus economically marginalized.

Spatial exclusion of this kind provokes discussions. After all, infrastructural changes intervene in the immediate everyday life of their users and are therefore not only political instruments, but also the focus of social negotiation of space and society. A look at how society deals with infrastructural disruptions can thus serve as a window of view to explore long-term social as well as spatial processes and narratives and to take a differentiated look at dynamics between politics and society.

Using the rural border area of the inner-German border as an example, this paper aims to show how the interruption of previously existing mobility infrastructures changed the spatial understanding of local residents in the long term and what influence this understanding consequently had on political narratives.

When one thinks of the division of Germany, one of the first images that come to mind is certainly that of the Berlin Wall: as a symbol of oppression and deprivation of freedom, it has inscribed itself in the visual memory of Germany and Europe since its construction in 1961.¹ In fact, the Berlin Wall was only a small part of the almost 1,400 km long inner-German border, which was constantly fortified in the course of its 40-year existence, but in numerous places in the rural periphery did still not go beyond a wire mesh fence.

However, I do not want to talk about the inner-German border per se. Rather, it should be the starting point for illuminating how it restricted the mobility of the Germans living there and, in

¹ Detlef Schmiechen-Ackermann, *Teilung - Gewalt - Durchlässigkeit. Die innerdeutsche Grenze als Thema und Problem der deutschen Zeitgeschichte*, in: Thomas Schwark/Detlef Schmiechen-Ackermann/Carl-Hans Hauptmeyer (Ed.), *Grenzziehungen - Grenzerfahrungen - Grenzüberschreitungen. Die innerdeutsche Grenze 1945 - 1990*, Darmstadt 2011, p. 16–22, p. 18.

the process, influenced their understanding of space. Based on the state of my research so far, I will concentrate on the West German perspective on border-crossing and border-disrupted mobility infrastructures.

The occupation zones established in the course of the division of Germany and the founding of two states in 1949 led to the interruption of numerous mobility infrastructures, which were further intensified over the years. Responsible for this was also the behaviour of residents near the border after the end of the war, who did not easily adapt to the new infrastructural conditions, but transformed other spaces to serve a (different) infrastructural purpose. To avoid border controls, back doors, gardens and forests became transit stations for lively smuggling or to visit relatives on the other side of the border. Turnpikes and border fences across formerly connecting roads and fields between communities became Sunday meeting places.

The train and road connections that still existed until 1952 were used to visit relatives in the East. The bypassing of checkpoints, the combination of different infrastructures and the poor supply situation after the war resulted in detours lasting hours or days, where the duration and the specific travel route were often not foreseeable at the start of the journey and the travellers often had to rely on information they received through personal contacts.²

With the end of local border traffic ("Kleiner Grenzverkehr") from 1952, which also increasingly restricted unofficial border crossings, the special infrastructural isolation of the two German states from each other became increasingly apparent to the citizens of West Germany. A 40 km wide strip along the inner-German border was designated on the West German side as a zonal border area ("Zonenrandgebiet") and as particularly worthy of subsidies because of its infrastructural remoteness. However, the subsidies did not change the fact that the population of this zonal border area no longer felt at the heart but the periphery of the German mobility network. In 1976, the punk rock band Athon-Re from Coburg sang the following in their song "Wir leben an der Grenze" ("We live on the border"):

*„The railroad line that once ran here,
has been lying idle for twenty years now.
just above everything here lies idle,
no wonder no one wants to stay here anymore.
We live on the border,*

² Cf. Margareta Baacke, Der Sprung auf den fahrenden Zug, in: Jürgen Kleindienst (Ed.), Von hier nach drüben. Grenzgänge, Fluchten und Reisen, Berlin 2001, p. 29–39; Heinrich Thies, Weit ist der Weg nach Zicherie. Die Geschichte eines geteilten Dorfes an der deutsch-deutschen Grenze, Hamburg 2007.

*we live at the end of the world,
where in the end
nothing and no one can hold you. “³*

With their lyrics, the band, which achieved modest fame in the FRG, struck a chord in their region.⁴ While the West German border area confronts us until the early 1950s through the creative and subversive behaviour of the residents as a permeable area still linked to the East, as a "passage spac[e]"⁵ between two political spaces, 20 years later the zonal border area seems to have become a closed space in itself. Due to the lack of mobility infrastructures in everyday life (but also due to media reports and political debates), this border area was no longer perceived by the residents as a connecting space to "over there" ("drüben") and this even though new regulations and relaxations for cross-border infrastructures were introduced in the early 1970s.

Despite the easing of transit traffic for West Germans travelling to the East in the course of the Transit Agreement ("Transitabkommen", 1971) and the Basic Treaty ("Grundlagenvertrag", 1973), journeys to East Germany remained an extra-ordinary event that shaped the population's experience of space. Thus one can read the anger and disappointment in the face of the harassment experienced when crossing the border in Lotti Buchwald's memoir published seven years after reunification:

"You could travel everywhere without any problems, and abroad we were welcome guests. Only our own fatherland, the home of our parents and our children's grandparents, was locked and barricaded. We needed strong nerves, because a trip "over there" was not only associated with harassment and trouble at the border. The state did not even receive us like guests, but like cash cows that had to be milked."⁶

³ Original quote: „Die Eisenbahnlinie, die hier einmal verlief,/die liegt nun schon seit zwanzig Jahren still./Still liegt hier so ziemlich alles,/kein Wunder, dass keiner mehr hier bleiben will./Wir leben an der Grenze,/wir leben am Ende der Welt,/wo einen auf die Dauer/nichts und niemand hält.“, Volkmar Heidenfelder, *Wir leben an der Grenze*, in: Ragout Fin de Siecle 1976.

⁴ This narrative pattern, in which the zonal border area is described as the end of the world due to its infrastructural peripheral location and proximity to the Eastern bloc, can also be found later in other recollections of former zonal border residents, vgl. Hans Pleschinski, *Ostsucht. Eine Jugend im deutsch-deutschen Grenzland*, München 2012, p. 18; Thies: *Weit ist der Weg*, p. 101–102.

⁵ Laura Di Fiore, Production. *Historicizing Border-Making*, in: Luca Gaeta/Alice Buoli (Ed.), *Transdisciplinary Views on Boundaries. Towards a New Lexicon*, Milano 2020, p. 181–193, p. 190.

⁶ Original quote: „Überall konnte man problemlos hinfahren, und im Ausland waren wir gern gesehene Gäste. Nur das eigene Vaterland, die Heimat unserer Eltern und der Großeltern unserer Kinder, wurde verriegelt und verrammelt. Wir brauchten ein starkes Nervenkostüm, denn eine Reise "nach drüben" war ja nicht nur mit Schikanen und Ärger an der Grenze verbunden. Der Staat empfing uns nicht einmal wie Gäste, sondern wie Goldesel, die es zu schröpfen galt.“, Lotti Buchwald, *Drüben ist auch anderswo. Erinnerungen an die Altmark und an Reisen von hüben nach drüben im geteilten Deutschland*, Magdeburg 1997, p. 166.

Certainly, the travel activities of West Germans to the East may seem liberal compared to the travel opportunities of East Germans, who were generally only granted permission to leave the country at retirement age or for professional reasons with an impeccable political background. But the negative experiences with the cross-border mobility infrastructures, which one could learn from through the media or reports from friends/relatives, as well as political convictions and entry bans, kept many West Germans from exploring "distant" East Germany before reunification, despite existing social contacts. In his travel report written a few months after his trip, Werner G. initially cites a lack of personal contacts in the GDR as the reason why he waited until 1990 to explore the GDR. A reason that does not hold up on closer inspection of his travel report, in which he nevertheless describes visiting several relatives in the former East Germany. More plausible, on the contrary, seems his second justification, that the negative experiences he had with border controls and East German infrastructure as a transit traveller through the GDR from West Germany to areas of the Soviet Union left him with "the feeling of insecurity, of surveillance" and prevented him from developing an interest in East Germany.⁷

The fear of the authoritarian regime that West Germans faced, especially during any journeys to or through East Germany⁸, not only restricted their freedom of movement from a legal/material point of view, but in the course of the existence of the Inner German Border restricted their choice of destination on a personal level. It was therefore not only the material spatial interruptions that were responsible for the users' changed sense of space, but rather the accompanying emotionally connoted imaginings of space.

The preceding examples of the user perspective on the mobility infrastructures interrupted by the Iron Curtain clearly show that the experience of spatial exclusion did not begin immediately with the politically induced changes in the material conditions of infrastructures. Even though these infrastructures outwardly and on a political as well as economic level have impressively marked spatial exclusion (or inclusion) since the end of the Second World War, it was only when these infrastructural changes were inscribed in the everyday routines of the population that one could speak of a real spatial (because social) change.

⁷ Deutsches Tagebucharchiv Emmendingen (DTA) Sig. Nr. 1680.

⁸ Axel Doßmann described the transit experience for West Germans as a "school of dictatorship", which in memoirs and novels ended with the liberating and relieving moment of returning to the West, Axel Doßmann, *Die Transitaubahn*, in: Martin Sabrow (Ed.), *Erinnerungsorte der DDR*, Bonn 2010, p. 267–277, p. 267.