Kerstin Lange

PHANTOM BORDER

A Personal Reconnaissance
of Contemporary Germany

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Praise for Phantom Border

This book combines adventure, history, and a narrative of how people lived confronted with the post WWII environment in Germany. Lange explores consequences and lessons that continue to the present day. It tackles the larger issues, the importance of home, and its offshoot into conservation biology and ethics. With verve and clarity, it serves a rich fare for a wide readership. It is a great read.

Bernd Heinrich, author
(Mind of the Raven, The Trees in My Forest, The Snoring Bird, A Year in the Maine Woods, The Homing Instinct)

Lange's language is beautiful, poetic at just the right moments: a linguistic joy.

The book is written with exactly the sensitivity that is needed in matters concerning East and West in today's Germany. Lange's own story provides one thread of the book, making for a captivating read and providing an important perspective.

Andrea Mehrländer, PhD
Executive Director, Academy of Transatlantic Academic Studies; Berlin, Germany

Lange's training in both anthropology and natural science has resulted in a valuable perspective on the recent history of Germany. Readers will be moved by insights the book provides into human experiences of both the present and the past along the now former border and will be captivated by the knowledge it offers into the unique biodiversity of the Green Belt. Making this text even more compelling are the many meaningful glimpses we gain from it into Lange's own personal journey within a society that has undergone significant transformation over the course of her lifetime.

Gerard A. Weber, PhD
Associate Professor, Anthropology and Sociology, Bronx Community College of the City University of New York

Phantom Border blends skilled storytelling, highly illustrative writing, and a kind of empathetic reportage that really makes me feel immersed in every scene. Satisfying for mind and heart.

Phyllis Edgerly Ring, author
(The Munich Girl, Snow Fence Road, Life at First Sight)

An anthropological perspective takes seriously what people say and do and tries to understand their sayings and doings in their own terms without judging their 'truth' or 'falsity.' This attitude does not imply that one has to surrender one's own beliefs, but it does imply that one has to appreciate other perspectives. The anthropologist aims for empathy rather than sympathy.

– Richard Antoun

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.

– Robert Frost

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Map 1: The location of the Green Belt/the former border between East and West Germany.

Base map by NordNordWest, September 15, 2014, with modifications by Lencer.
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Germany_adm_location_map.svg
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Modifications by David Scheuing and the author.

Map 2: The Expedition

Map 2: Places visited along the expedition.

Base map by NordNordWest, September 15, 2014, with modifications by Lencer.
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Germany_adm_location_map.svg
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Preface

I grew up in a divided country. On the mental map of my childhood, East Germany—the *other* Germany, from my western perspective—was a distant shadow, a blank shape behind the Iron Curtain, as unknown as Poland, Hungary, or Romania. When I moved to the northeastern US to be with my then-fiancé in 1986, East Germany became even more distant. It was not until November 9, 1989, that those other Germans became real to me.

I had spent the summer months of 1989 not in the US, but in a remote region in Kenya, working among cattle- and camel-herding nomads[1] on an anthropological research project. It was there, on the rare occasions when I could track down a newspaper, that I first picked up on unusual events in Eastern Europe. That June, Poland held its first free elections. In August, hundreds and eventually thousands of East German citizens crammed into the West German embassies in East Berlin, Budapest, and Prague, refusing to leave except to go to West Germany. On August 19, East German vacationers walked across the Iron Curtain from Hungary to Austria when it was opened for a cross-border picnic—in itself an unheard-of event. On October 9, seventy thousand peaceful protesters marched in the East German city of Leipzig, chanting "We are the people!" The Berlin Wall fell one month later. With that, the 1,400-kilometer-long militarized border that had separated the two German states lost its purpose as well.

The events of that November day unleashed a wave of collective euphoria: If the world's most fortified border could lose its deadly purpose overnight, what did this mean for other borders? If a peaceful revolution could bring the Cold War to an end, anything seemed possible. The subsequent abolition of border controls between most European nations[2] seemed to prove the boundless optimism right.

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1 The Turkana of Northwest Kenya.

2 Defined in the Schengen Agreement, signed initially by France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Belgium. The Schengen area was established by the European Economic Area (EEA, a forerunner organization of the European

Contrary to the early hopes, however, the facts on the ground developed in a different direction: while only fifteen militarized borders existed in the world in 1989, that number increased to seventy over the next twenty-five years. The combination of global forces such as climate-related disasters, the unpredictable flow of capital and jobs, and related conflicts from local rebellions to full-scale wars added to the rapid increase in the world's refugee population. At the same time, borders, identity, and questions of belonging became ever more prominent issues, along with opinions—voiced with increasing aggression and then violence—about who belonged and who did not.

I was trying to process these developments from my adopted home in Vermont, where I myself had once arrived as a stranger and, over the years, found a sense of belonging. It had started with a love affair with "the woods" and soon came to include the people. Although I felt at home in the almost completely flat landscape of my childhood in northwestern Germany, the hills and forests of Vermont had exerted a magical attraction on me, had even given me refuge during a time when life had felt unmoored. Ralph Waldo Emerson's words "In these woods we return to reason and faith" and Henry David Thoreau, through *Walden* and *Walking*, spoke to me like friends. My first anchoring to my new home state was a job as a ranger-naturalist along the Long Trail, Vermont's "footpath in the wilderness"—the hiking trail that runs from Massachusetts to the Canadian border along the spine of the Green Mountains.

It was as good a second *Heimat*—a place of belonging—as anyone could ask for. And yet, over the years Germany, too, called to me: my parents were getting older and frailer, and news reports from Germany often confounded me. The formation of an increasingly right-wing party[3] signaled a shift in the political landscape

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Union) to allow free movement of member states' citizens within the EEA and later the EU. The agreement was signed in the town of Schengen, Luxembourg, in June 1985 and took effect in March 1995.

3 Alternative for Germany (AfD). Initially founded in 2013 on an anti–European Union platform, the AfD has become increasingly nationalistic and anti-immigration. Though much of the AfD's leadership hails from Western Germany, the party's rise has been particularly strong in the East.

into nationalist territory; attacks against people perceived to be foreigners conjured specters of Germany's darkest history. Occasionally there was talk about a new or continuing "wall in our heads." My occasional visits back to Germany, I realized, were not enough to understand what was going on. I had been doubly removed from life in "the East" by my West German provenance and, since 1987, by my own life in the United States.

For close to twenty years, the actual wall that had separated the two Germanys did not enter my mind. I did not wonder what was left of it, or where exactly it had run. It was gone, and that was a good thing.

What was left of it, I learned as I listened to a German radio station on the internet one day, was a unique nature preserve called the *Grünes Band* or Green Belt.[4] During the four decades of the Cold War, over a thousand threatened plant and animal species had found refuge in and near the border strip. Soon after the opening of the border, conservationists from East and West had resolved to preserve that narrow ribbon of land as both a nature preserve and a landscape of remembrance: a 1,400-kilometer-long, 50-to-200-meter-wide, bizarrely shaped biological corridor and living memorial in one.

I was fascinated by the irony of history that had brought this about, and I wanted to see this Green Belt for myself. A first visit in 2010 only whetted my curiosity. *What if I used the old border as my personal Long Trail, my path through Germany, the prism through which I would explore my reunited but unsettled home country?*

I began to sketch out a plan. If I wanted to talk to people, find out what the border had meant in their lives, and get a sense of the larger landscape, it would not do to strictly follow the border strip. The only part of it that would have lent itself to bike riding was the patrol track used by the East German border guards. But its concrete panels had a regular pattern of oblong holes that were treacherous for bike tires. Besides, long stretches of the patrol track had been removed after the border opened.

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[4] The literal translation would be Green Ribbon or Band, but Green Belt evolved as common usage in English.

A recently published guidebook, the *Deutsch-Deutscher Radweg*[5] (German-German Bike Route), seemed to fit my purposes well; it showed the border line but also suggested nearby bike paths, roads, villages, border museums, accommodations, and bike repair shops on both sides.

In the summer of 2016, I embarked on the first section of a multi-year expedition by bicycle, on foot, and, for occasional side trips, by train and by car. Over the course of that journey, I heard about the exasperating restrictions of life in the border zone during the time of Germany's division and about the high cost—arrest or death—paid by those who attempted escape. I met up with the "father of the Green Belt," who, as an astute thirteen-year-old in the 1970s, had first documented the high incidence of rare bird species along the border strip. I sat around a table with former border guards from both sides, and I listened to people whose lives the *Stasi* (the East German secret police) had intruded upon in insidious ways. I also heard about the small and not so small ways in which people defied the system, the strong sense of community many of them had felt, and the hopes that had been fulfilled or dashed after the momentous events of 1989.

Somewhere along the way, I came to think of my expedition as a sort of pilgrimage, and of my navigation strategy as "structured sauntering." While the former border provided the geographical structure, my journey's spirit came to be infused with the words of Thoreau, who described the word "sauntering" as derived from

> […] idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going *a la Sainte Terre,* to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, "There goes a Sainte-Terrer," a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander. They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. Some, however, would derive the word from *sans terre*, without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. For this is the secret of successful sauntering.[6]

[5] Cramer 2015.

[6] Thoreau 1862.

While my journey was not aimed at the actual Holy Land, I was quite literally traveling on sacred ground: several hundred people died along this strip of land. *A landscape of remembrance*. Building on this central truth, I wanted to explore the land itself, the story of how it came to be and the stories of the living beings that came to be part of it. In particular, I wanted to find out how a dividing line drawn across the land had shaped the people and the land around it, and what echoes it had left. So in some way I would indeed be asking for charity: not for money or for food, but for people's stories and memories.

There was also the element of home in the second interpretation Thoreau cites: "*sans terre*, without land or a home." This is a central question in the lives of those who have left their original home, whether by choice, necessity, or force. Can one ever find another home? Or is it possible to be equally at home everywhere, as Thoreau suggests?

In the process of my sauntering, I came to see that the "German-German" border had not only left its own legacies in the land and in the people, but that it was itself an echo of much older borders, and perhaps even of older European landscapes: *a phantom border*. The timeline of my thinking expanded.

* * *

While I was tracing the Green Belt to reconnect with my home country, hundreds of thousands of people from parts of the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America were leaving their homes to escape war, drought, and social upheaval.[7] In Europe, borders that had been opened after the Cold War were closed again; the US border with Mexico was increasingly militarized. Hundreds of people were drowning in the Mediterranean and dying of heat stroke and dehydration in remote regions of Central America. On both continents, the response from not only parts of the population but also from high-level government figures was hostility and blanket

[7] According to the United Nations, nearly 80 million people were forcibly displaced from their homes in 2019.

condemnation of Muslims, refugees, and foreigners. At times, I felt desolate about the course of humanity, as if the weight of history along the phantom border were not tragicreason enough. As if we humans could not find lessons in that history.

At least as often, I received inspiration and generosity from the people I encountered. Sometimes it was little things, like the retired border police chief who invited me in for coffee, or the innkeeper who poured me an extra-generous glass of wine when I arrived drenched from a day of riding in the rain. Sometimes it was people who were dedicating their free time to keeping the memory of the border alive or to making their community a better place. Every day, it was the surroundings of the Green Belt, an oasis of remarkable space and quiet in a fast-moving world.

This book, then, is a love letter to the creatures, human and wild, of the German borderland.

Chapter 1: The Eastern Sea

The barbed wire between the two German states always
went straight through my heart
—Wolf Biermann, singer-songwriter

I sensed the sea in the air before I could see it. The subtle hint of salt, the tangy whiff of seaweed and soggy beach silt. A smile spread over my face as I inhaled. This was what air was supposed to feel like. For a moment, the morning breeze transported me back to the North Sea coast, to the sea of my childhood. To the endless waters and beaches and dunes that gave my childhood a magical sense of freedom.

Strictly speaking, the landscape of my childhood extended some eighty kilometers inland, to the edge of Bremen, the old Hanseatic city on the river Weser. Even more strictly speaking, most of my childhood unfolded in an urban setting, centered first on an apartment complex next to an Autobahn, then on a rented townhouse, and finally on the single-family home my parents had dreamed of and saved for all through my first thirteen years. But it was the landscapes of the North Sea coast and of the northwestern flatlands that imprinted themselves most strongly on my childhood brain.

The air that filled my lungs that July morning belonged to Germany's other sea, some 150 kilometers further east: the Baltic Sea, *Ostsee* in German—literally, the Eastern Sea. Steering my bicycle toward the Baltic coast, I could feel anticipation rising about this other, less familiar sea, and about my expedition along the border that had divided this coastline—and my home country, and the world—for forty years. More than a border between two nations, it was a *Systemgrenze*, a border that split the world into diametrically opposed social and economic systems.

From 1949 to 1990, most of the Baltic Sea coast lay in East Germany, officially known as the German Democratic Republic, or the GDR—a mysterious country about which I knew almost nothing until it ceased to exist. As a child in the 1960s, I had little reason to wonder why there were two Germanys. It had been that way since

before I was born. Occasionally there were news stories about hair-raising escapes from that other Germany—like that of two families who managed to fly over the deadly border strip in a homemade hot air balloon the summer I turned fifteen. And I knew vaguely that my friend Ingeborg's mother had fled from the *Eastern zone*—the *Ostzone*, as West Germans continued to refer to East Germany long after 1949, when both countries declared themselves sovereign states.[8] Even as a child, I knew that this was not just a geographic reference: the word carried a sad, almost ominous undertone when adults talked about it, a sense of irreversible loss that my brain could not grasp.

On this summer morning, I was glad that the air felt familiar. Glad, too, that this sturdy, black *Bremen Bike*—made in my hometown, as the red manufacturer's decal announced—would be my companion on this border journey. A sensible bike, with mud guards and dynamo hub lights. I liked this bike, I could tell even from the short ride to the train station near my parents' house that morning.

It was actually not my own bicycle—I no longer had one in Germany—but my father's. We both knew that he would have been a perfect travel companion on this expedition were it not for his failing eyesight. At seventy-nine, he was still in excellent physical shape, but more and more of his field of vision had vanished over the years. He had given up driving years ago, and then also the long bicycle trips he had loved, like the one along the entire Baltic Sea coast he had done with some friends a few years after Reunification.[9] Now he only rode his bike close to home, on the quiet paths he had known for decades, away from car traffic. I knew he would

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8 The two German states had no formal relations until the Foundational Agreement of 1972, and West Germany did not recognize East Germany as an independent state until the following year.

9 As will become clear in the course of the book, Reunification is a complicated term. It was not the term used in the legal framework that was applied at the time, and the territories united on October 3, 1990 do not represent Germany in any earlier state. I use the term both because it is the most widely recognized term for those events and because, as Daphne Berdahl (1999) points out, the term does express the fact "that Germany was divided in 1945 for a reason."

miss it. In a way, at least, he might feel like part of him would be with me on this journey.

I had left Bremen earlier in the morning on a train to Lübeck, whose city limits ran right up against the border with East Germany during the Cold War. Some years ago, when I first started thinking about the border, I had asked a friend from Lübeck what it was like to live so close to it. He said it was eerie and normal at the same time. "It sounds strange now that it's gone," he told me, "but somehow it became part of the landscape."[10]

From Lübeck, it was a short ride on a local train to the seaside resort of Travemünde—at the mouth of the river Trave, as its name states. At the station, I retrieved my bike from the train's designated bicycle car and pushed it along the platform.

I had barely pedaled a half mile from the train station in that exhilarating sea air when my nose picked up another missive: the warm, slightly yeasty aroma of fresh *Brötchen*—breakfast rolls. In all my years living away from Germany, I never stopped missing this scent, the scent that meant that the world was still *in Ordnung*. Or that even if it wasn't in order, I could at least take temporary refuge in that scent. Once, many years ago, in my bed in upstate New York, I woke up with a sense of that comforting smell and a feeling of deep contentment, and then realized, startled, that it had been part of a dream. Even in Vermont, where I had moved in the mid-nineties and which is blessed with good bakeries, I could never find fresh Brötchen.

I had not exactly planned to make a stop so soon, but if my mission was to reconnect with Germany, I figured a bakery stop was almost mandatory. And this one clearly looked, and smelled, like a winner: the display case nearly burst with at least a dozen

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[10] Historian Robert Darnton described the same phenomenon for people on both sides of the Berlin Wall: "Soon after 1961…the million or so inhabitants on the Eastern side and the 2 million or so on the Western side began to lose contact. By 1989 a whole generation had come of age within the shadow of the Wall. Most of them never crossed it, even from West to East when that was allowed. They accepted the Wall as a fact of life, as something inexorable, built into the landscape—there when they were born and there when they died. They left it to tourists, took it for granted, forgot about it, or simply stopped seeing it" (Darnton 1991, p. 83).

different kinds of Brötchen, from the plain *Krosse* (crisp one) to the hearty wholegrain *Weltmeister* (world champion) and a number of rolls with maritime names like *Hanseat*.[11] The tinkly bell that pealed each time a customer entered sounded just like the one at my parents' neighborhood bakery in Bremen. And just like at that bakery, the tinkling was followed by a "Moin," the ubiquitous northern German greeting. Several tables seemed to be filled with regulars; the buzz of conversation mingled with the waft of the fresh *Brötchen*. I didn't know anyone there, but the place pulled me in with a sense of the familiar, of home.

I ordered a *Weltmeister* Brötchen with butter and jam and sat down at a table near the window. Maybe this bakery-café could help me think about home, or even *Heimat*.

Some words have meanings that are easy to translate, but *Heimat* is not one of them. In the Middle Ages, it was a legal term that meant someone had the right to settle and follow their trade in a particular location. The word still has the meaning of home place, or the place a person is from.[12] But most of the meaning of Heimat lies below the surface of this geographic fact, like the bulk of an iceberg. Heimat is inseparably tied to a person's feelings about that physical place: a sense of belonging, of feeling understood, of connectedness with a particular landscape and familiar people, of not being a stranger, of one's native habitat.

And yet, there is a dark side to Heimat. Enveloped by the smells and the sounds around me, a corner of my mind opened a crack to a different connotation, to a meaning that connects Heimat with national identity and all too easily spills over into exclusion, even disdain for anyone "other." The Nazis seized on this aspect of Heimat and almost managed to poison the term beyond repair. For decades after World War II, young Germans were embarrassed to

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11 Named after the Hanseatic League, whose merchants had plied the waters of the Baltic Sea and the North Sea centuries ago.

12 Some would translate it as "homeland," but the word *Heimat* does not in itself refer to a country or a nation. In current American English usage, the term "homeland" for *Heimat* seems misleading, at least since the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security in 2002 and the spy thriller series *Homeland* (2011).

use the word and avoided it like the plague, except in combined terms like *Heimatstadt* (home city) or Heimweh (missing one's home). The rise of the postwar *Heimatfilm* movie genre, with its abundance of dirndls, bright green Bavarian mountain scenes, and kitschy storylines, did little to redeem the word. And now, as I recently learned from a magazine article, there was a Heimat club that artfully mixed anti-foreigner messages into announcements for harvest festivals and bicycle outings, and an initiative that called itself "Zukunft Heimat" (Heimat as future) that organized protests against refugee shelters.

* * *

Fortified by my Brötchen, I stepped outside, unlocked the bicycle, and set out to find whatever was left of the German-German border's northern end.

The first step was to find the ferry to the Priwall peninsula, which was once cut in half by the border. During the Cold War, the only way to access the Priwall from West Germany was by ferry across the Trave. From the east, where the peninsula is attached to the mainland, only GDR border guards and officials of the *Stasi*—East Germany's secret police—were allowed to set foot on it. For regular East German citizens, the Priwall was off-limits.

Turning a corner, I spotted a sign pointing to the ferry dock at the end of a street lined with red brick buildings. *This is what houses are supposed to look like.* As a child, I used to think that all houses were built of red brick, until I realized that northern Germany's plentiful clay was simply the most logical building material to use.

I rode past store windows displaying beach toys and seaside-resort souvenirs with maritime motifs: lighthouses, anchors, sailing ships, seashells. The faint scent of suntan lotion mingled with the brackish sea air. Children skipped along the sidewalk, carrying plastic pails and child-sized shovels, ready for a new day of beach adventures. On one of the clothing racks outside a store, dark blue fishermen's shirts with white stripes were on display, exactly like the one I was wearing and that had become soft and thin over the years. Anywhere more than a hundred kilometers south of the

coast, people would probably consider it slightly strange with its plain, angular cut, or simply think, "She's from up north." *Maybe that's why I took it with me on this expedition*: a small piece of home. There in the Travemünde vacation bustle, no one paid attention to me or my shirt.

The ferry ride to the peninsula took less than ten minutes and landed me on Mecklenburg Road, the main road east across the peninsula. Modest bungalows—vacation and weekend homes, by the look of it—arranged in rows and circles sat to the left of the road. The seashore had to be just beyond the gently undulating beach grass covering the dunes.

* * *

During the Cold War, Mecklenburg Road had ended at the border—the Iron Curtain, as Winston Churchill had called it in his famous speech in March of 1946. My eyes scanned the sides of the road. I was not exactly sure what I was looking for—an old watchtower? A piece of the border fence? A faded black-red-gold border post with the East German hammer-and-compass emblem and the words "Deutsche Demokratische Republik"? I did not see any of these things.

The first clue came when the even purr of smooth asphalt under my tires gave way to the quietly crunching sound of packed dirt. From the corner of my eye, I spotted a massive boulder to the left of the bike path. I turned around and pushed my bike back to read the inscription:

Never again divided.

Now I noticed that the last row of the vacation homes lined up perfectly with the boulder and the change in pavement. Lesson One: figuring out where exactly the border had been would require some detective work.

Next to the boulder, an interpretive sign explained that at this particular location, the border was opened on February 3, 1990. An aerial black-and-white photo next to it showed throngs of people

converging on the wintry beach from opposite directions. The photo was grainy, the people in it looked like indistinct ants. My eyes welled up.

I leaned my bike against the side of the boulder and gazed east, past the almost imperceptible change in Mecklenburg Road's pavement. The vacation homes were behind me now, an unruly miniature forest lined both sides of the road ahead. Wild rose bushes, small willows, poplars, white birches, some stunted white pine; the distinctive warm orange of sea buckthorn berries poked through the countless shades of green. No obvious features in the landscape that would have served as a natural boundary, like a mountain range or a river, though rivers did form part of the "German-German" border farther south. Not that a river or a mountain range ever *had* to be a border, or that a border had to be a wall.

THE BORDER

(1 km = 0.6 mi; 1m = 3.28 ft.)

1,265 km of expanded metal fencing
829 km of anti-vehicle ditches
1,339 km of patrol track
232 km of illuminated control strips
473 observation bunkers
578 observation towers

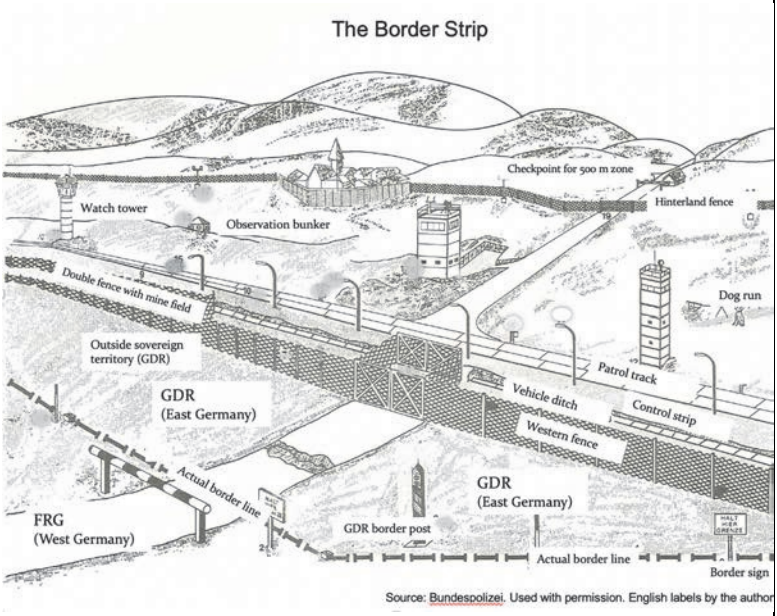

Figure 1. Schematic of the border strip's spatial structure

From May 1952 on, the GDR (East Germany) secured the border between the two German states with a variety of obstacles. In addition, it designated a 5 km wide restricted zone (*Sperrgebiet*) and a 500 m protective strip (*Schutzstreifen*). Nowhere did the border fence sit on the actual border line. The two-fold purpose of the outside sovereign territory was to pursue escapees and to access the outside of the fence for repairs or upgrades.

The diagram in Figure 1 shows the general layout of the border strip. Looking east from the actual border line was the GDR's "outside sovereign territory," an open area of about 50 m, followed by the first of two fences. Next came the control track, a 6-meter strip of barren soil that was raked daily so that footprints of any escapees would be visible. The remaining area between the two fences contained light posts, a vehicle ditch, mine fields, watch towers, and dog runs. The eastern or hinterland fence was equipped with signal wire that, when touched, alerted the guards in the watchtower via an electronic signal. The exact makeup of the border strip varied somewhat along its length based on topography or other local conditions.

This particular border was drawn up at a series of conferences during and shortly after World War II to define the Allied powers' respective occupation zones. But the border's history began with the German Wehrmacht's[13] invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. You could even say that it began before that, with Hitler's seizure of power on January 30, 1933. Without the Nazi crimes and the unprovoked war, Germany would not have been partitioned or occupied.

For the first few years, the border was merely a demarcation line between the Soviet zone and those occupied by the western Allies. The line only became a border in 1949 with the declaration of two separate nation states.[14] For the first few years, it was still a

[13] The German armed forces before and during WW II.

[14] Historian Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk points out that contemporary witnesses in 1949 considered the declaration of the two German states a provisional measure intended to be short-lived (Kowalczuk 2024).

fairly benign border—you could cross it in both directions with proper identification for work, family visits, or to buy or sell things.

All of this came to a grinding halt in 1952, when the Soviet-backed East German government issued a "directive for a special regime on the demarcation line"—a new legal framework that, over the years, transformed the border into a strip of land filled with ghastly obstacles (see Figure 1). From the eastern side, the strip was bordered by a signal fence—named for the wires that would send a silent signal to the guards in the watchtower at the slightest touch. There was a westward fence, too, set back some fifty meters from the border line. *They thought of everything,* I remember thinking when I first saw a model of the installations at a border museum. That fifty-meter strip, called the "outward sovereign territory," allowed specially authorized border guards to make repairs to the western side of the fence. It also gave them a clear line of sight to follow—and shoot at—escapees.

Gazing into the scraggly little forest along Mecklenburg Road, I was reminded of my first visit to the former border in March 2010 and the memorial I saw that damp, cold March day. It was a simple, weathered wooden cross that blended in with the surrounding Scotch pine stand, its surface reflecting a dark green sheen of lichen. An inscription on a small brass plaque read:

Bernhard Simon
30. Juli 1945—28. Oktober 1963
Er wollte von Deutschland nach Deutschland.
He wanted to go from Germany to Germany.

My guide that day, a Green Belt volunteer named Jürgen Starck, explained that Bernhard had tried to escape together with his brother Siegfried that night in 1963 and stepped on a landmine. The detonation nearly tore off one of his legs. His brother managed to pull him onto West German soil and tie off the injured leg, then had to run nearly two miles to get help. Bernhard died on the way to the hospital.[15]

[15] Research about the total number of people who died in the context of the border is ongoing, as are debates over who should be included in the count (only

I cannot say how long I stared at the cross, feeling the weight of the border hit me like a fist to the stomach. *From Germany to Germany.* Bernhard had been only eighteen when his life so violently ended at the border, a year before I was born in the Germany he died trying to reach. Never had the border felt so personal as in that moment: only the geographic accident of my birth in the West had spared me from facing the decision Bernhard had made. At eighteen, I was preoccupied with the anxieties of preparing for my *Abitur* exams and figuring out the next step after that. None of that compared in the slightest to the decision with which Bernhard must have grappled: whether to leave his country, his mother (his father had already fled to West Germany years before), and his friends, knowing with near certainty that he would never see them again, and aware they would likely suffer serious repercussions as a result of his decision. The alternative was to live under the fist of a regime that had ruined the professional dreams of both brothers for expressing critical views.

I looked at the aerial photo on the sign once more, at the tiny dots of people converging on the beach. Yes, it had reminded me of the heavy burden the border had imposed on people's lives. But there was another layer to my tears. Shot through with the grief about the border was the memory of the electric joy at its unexpected demise.

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It was late afternoon in upstate New York on November 9, 1989, when a friend practically ordered me to turn the TV on because "something big is going on in Berlin." And so I found myself staring at the screen, an ocean away from Germany, speechless, not comprehending what I was seeing. Throngs of people were crossing

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people trying to cross the border? Border guards who died in the line of work? Border guards who committed suicide in the context of their work? People who died at the border but were not trying to cross?). The latest numbers for all of these categories, counting those at the Berlin Wall, the inner-German border, the Baltic Sea, and the borders of Eastern European countries add up to 943 (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2023).