Introduction

Borders in the Social and Cultural Practice of Communist and Postcommunist Europe

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This special issue* of *East Central Europe* reflects upon the historical relevance and implications of the communist border regimes for societies of the former Eastern bloc, while balancing the political history of borders with the everyday life aspects of bordering, namely, with the social and cultural practice in borderlands and cross-border cooperation. The examination of the East/West and East/East border predicament aims at a nuanced understanding of everyday practices of domination and of their appropriation by local actors. The articles in the special issue span the period from the détente to the years following the dissolution of the Eastern bloc, which was accompanied by the creation of new borders within its former territory and by its participation in European efforts toward unification. The editors set as the main goal of the special issue to contribute to the shifting of the focus of border research from the political aspects of border regimes to everyday practices at the border, and to look beyond the East-West divisions to the divisions within the former Eastern bloc itself.

Daphne Berdahl expressed succinctly the significance and *meaning-fullness* of borders in her study of a village community at the former inner German border in the months following the German unification:

Borders ... generate stories, legends, events, and incidents; they are contested and negotiated in culturally specific ways by individuals and the state; they are resources for both legal and illegal exchanges of goods and services; they are sites of surveillance, control, regulation, and inspection; and they are places of secrecy, fear, danger, and desire.

Berdahl 1999: 8

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The vast field of border studies subsumes a broad range of subjects including both metaphorical and material borders; our concern here is the latter. It includes, among others, the study of identity formation and memory (e.g., Sahlins 1989; Balibar 2004; Zhurzhenko 2010), liminal spaces and territoriality (Paasi 1996; Berdahl 1999), sovereignty and power constellation (Donnan and Wilson 1999; Franke and Scott 2007; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2008), and demarcation and crossings over (Coeuré and Dullin 2007; Borodziej, Kochanowski, and Puttkamer 2010). It is the hybrid nature of borders, separating and connecting at the same time (Anzaldúa 1987; Gupta and Ferguson 1997), and the place where “a transition between two worlds is most pronounced” (Van Gennep 1960, paraphrased in Berdahl 1999: 12), that makes them such an attractive and interdisciplinary site of research: it is of interest equally to geographers, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and other social scientists (e.g., Donnan and Wilson 1994; Anderson 1997; Ganster et al. 1997; Breysach, Paszek, and Tölle 2003; Wastl-Walter 2010).

On the subjects of Cold War border regimes and bordering, some researchers attempt a comprehensive overview of the political, social, and economic aspects of the divided Europe (Segert 2002; Baumgarten and Freitag 2005; Schwark, Schmiechen-Ackermann, and Hauptmeyer 2011), others focus on the paradoxical nature of the Soviet border regime: originally proclaiming an export of the revolutionary ideas and a creation of a truly multiethnic empire, while subsequently fortifying the borders and Sovietizing the border populations (Chandler 1998; Martin 2001; Weiner 2006; Coeuré and Dullin 2007). Yet another strand of new research considers the Cold War border regimes in terms of fissures within the Eastern bloc (Trutkowski 2011). Both the subversion and the power of the border regime are then made visible in the studies of “by-ways”: cross-border trading, smuggling, trespassing (Borodziej, Kochanowski, and Puttkamer 2010). The authors collected in this issue explore three interrelated areas: cultural cross-border cooperation, economic aspects of border crossings, and imaginative portrayals of borders. They draw on history, sociology, and cultural studies, and combine various local/regional, historical, and disciplinary perspectives with a wider European and interdisciplinary discussion.

The core of this collection is based on a selection of papers presented at the conference “From the Iron Curtain to the Schengen Area: Bordering Communist and Postcommunist Europe,” which was held in Vienna in September 2011. The conference concept was proposed by Thomas Lindenberger as the concluding international event of the long-term project on Cold War borders (Bläive and Molden 2009; Lindenberger 2010; Bläive and Lindenberger 2012; Bläive and Oates-Indruchová 2013) that was conducted at the now closed Ludwig