

Johnson, Jason B.: *Divided Village. The Cold War in the German Borderlands*. London: Routledge 2017. ISBN: 978-0-415-79377-3; X, 233 pp., 15 B/W Illus.

**Rezensiert von:** Ian Klinke, School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford

Jason B. Johnson's *Divided Village: The Cold War in the German Borderlands* provides an intimate account of everyday life in Mödlareuth, a highly securitised divided German border village that remains situated on the administrative boundary between Bavaria and Thuringia to this day. This place based history focuses less on the ideological and economic conflict between East and West, than on the social changes that this remote rural community underwent in and through the Cold War. In this, the book makes the case for an appreciation of the ways in which the iron curtain produced important local variations. It is also a story of how geopolitics became intensely localised at the margins of the Cold War conflict.

Mödlareuth is a small village that was known during the Cold War as „Little Berlin“ because of its exposed position on the iron curtain. Although there were other divided settlements along the inner German border, such as Sonneberg in Thuringia and Coburg in Bavaria, Mödlareuth, or so Johnson argues, is noteworthy due to its small population of only around 50 inhabitants. It was a village in which everyone quite literally knew one another, which resulted in particular challenges for the Cold War state.

Rather than offering a fully comparative account of the two parts of the divided village, Johnson predominantly focuses his discussion on the Eastern part of Mödlareuth, which first found itself under Soviet occupation after WWII, before coming under the jurisdiction of the German Democratic Republic in 1949. As part of the village lay inside the inner German border's most securitised ten meter-wide 'control strip', East Mödlareuth soon became a hotspot for the GDR's security services. Even 18 years after the fortified border came tumbling down, the village continues to have two postal codes and two mayors.

Johnson works his way through the Cold War history of East Mödlareuth chronologically, tracing the activity of the security services and the constantly changing nature of the border fortifications through a careful analysis of written archival documents. In the early 1950s, he reveals, the East German government laid the ground for what would become an antagonistic relationship between the state and the local population by forcibly evicting residents deemed ideologically unreliable from their homes on the Cold War frontier. Johnson then shows how a tightly-knit social network of villagers tried to resist the state's policy of forced collectivisation and the imposition of an atmosphere of fear amongst the village population. In what follows, the book unearths the ways in which Mödlareuth's local population came to live with their community's securitisation and militarisation, how it even managed to retain pockets of autonomous social life in the face of the State Security Service's relentless activity. Johnson's chapter 'Ass of the world', a phrase which works perhaps better in German than in English to convey a sense of East Mödlareuth's remoteness, skilfully extracts and exhibits the ways in which villagers increasingly came to identify secret informants and found ways to communicate with the western part of the village despite the heightened – and at times deadly – security measures that surrounded and penetrated their lives. In this then, the book tells, at least partially, the story of the *failure* of the Cold War as a set of security and bordering practices.

*Divided Village* is very well written and manages to fuse thick biographical description with a discussion of national and global political events. This careful teasing out of local agency through everyday history and personal vignettes is useful in elucidating state-citizen relationships in a political regime like the GDR. And whilst it is refreshing to come across a book about the iron curtain that is *not* about the latter's most iconic materialisation – the Berlin Wall – I felt that *Divided Village* had a tendency to undersell its contribution to the study of the Cold War. For whilst Mödlareuth is undoubtedly a fascinating case study for specialists on Cold War borderscapes, the book has a tendency to zoom

---

in and descend into local history rather than using its fascinating case to zoom out and reflect on what it might mean to write a history of the Cold War *from the margins*. Much of this has to do with the rather fleeting set up in the book's introductory chapter, which could have done more to address recent and ongoing debates in Cold War historiography. It does not help that the author has a tendency to emphasise the *sui generis* nature of East Mödlareuth. To produce such a carefully researched micro-history should not make it impossible to challenge what we think about the Cold War.

The book throws up the question as to what Mödlareuth is an instance of. Of course, the village is a fascinating prism through which to observe the incessant activities of the *Staatssicherheit*. And yet, a discussion of other divided villages and towns in European history, making use of the vast body of work that has emerged on this issue in urban sociology, planning and political geography, would have proven useful in highlighting the broader political questions that emerge when dwellings are carved up politically. *Divided Village* does mention other divided Cold War towns in Germany and Czechoslovakia in passing, but it does not reflect on the many divided cities and towns that emerged, perhaps somewhat ironically, *after* the fall of the iron curtain, namely in the break-up of Yugoslavia. Perhaps these more recently divided towns are policed in such fundamentally different ways that they are not in any way comparable to East Mödlareuth. But in the absence of such a comparative discussion or broader framing, this book sometimes struggles to persuade the reader that it offers more than the history of one, albeit fascinating, case.

HistLit 2018-1-016 / Ian Klinke über Johnson, Jason B.: *Divided Village. The Cold War in the German Borderlands*. London 2017, in: H-Soz-Kult 12.01.2018.