

2

Publicity, Secrecy, and the
Politics of Everyday Life

Even more than in other regions of the GDR, the state was a constant and highly visible presence in Kella. Because of its immediate proximity to the border between East and West Germany, sirens, army jeeps, border guards, and watch towers were part of daily life (Figure 8). A "signal fence," armed with an optical and acoustic alarm system as well as multiple rows of barbed wire, ran directly behind many village homes and gardens. Curfew was usually set at 11 P.M., but during periods of especially strict state control people had to be back in the village by sundown. In a culture of surveillance where everyone owned binoculars, border guards watched residents, residents watched border guards, western relatives peered down into the village from the hilltop "window to Kella" in search of the familiar, and villagers looked eagerly, though cautiously, through their lenses to see whether distant visitors were



Figure 8. The two border fences that surrounded Kella and the no-man's-land between them, 1989. The hills, including this hilltop, known locally as the Silberklippe, mark the actual former geopolitical boundary between East and West Germany as well as multiple historical boundaries, including that of the Catholic Eichsfeld. At the lower tree line is a road made of concrete slabs used for surveillance jeeps. (Photograph courtesy of Gisela Lange)

people they recognized. The presence of state structures was so internalized by people living here, in fact, that a year after the Wall fell some people were still taking their feet off their automobile accelerators or reaching for their identity cards while approaching the site where a barrier and control point for the *Schutzstreifen* used to be.

Despite the state's high visibility—in which certain rules and the consequences of breaking them were well known—much of the regime remained an enigma. With its actions (and some actors) shrouded in secrecy and with its seemingly arbitrary use of power, the state was able to sustain a mystique of the unknown. This sense of secrecy not only created a space in which people sought to determine "the boundaries of the possible" (Geyer n.d.); it also endowed the regime with an almost super-

natural quality. The state and its actions became something people had to interpret, and the regime derived power from the way in which it was interpreted, enacted, even resisted. The interplay between above and below, between the known and the unknown, between the state and its citizens was crucial in sustaining the socialist system in East Germany.

My principal aim in this chapter is to explore how the regime was affirmed and contested in everyday practice by focusing on the experiences of residents of Kella under socialism. Viewing the state not as a thing but as a set "of social processes and relations," in this chapter I attempt to provide what Katherine Verdery has called "an ethnography of the state" (1996: 209).¹ I begin by examining daily routines and practices of the socialist state, including institutions and organizations that formed the microfoundations of power in everyday interaction, and I note the degrees of complicity and conformity such interaction entailed. Of particular relevance is the way in which these institutions, and individual participation in them, contributed to an "affirmation of the regime through controlled dissent" (Geyer n.d.). I suggest the German term *Zwischenraum* (space between) as a concept to describe the space between the parameters of the known, in which people negotiated the limits of the possible and, in so doing, helped define them. This notion of a *Zwischenraum*, with its spatial implications and connotations of interstitiality, obviously shares certain affinities with the borderland metaphor employed throughout the book; yet it is also distinct from this metaphor (hence my choice of a different term) because of its relationship to a dynamic of state power.² Certain everyday practices, I argue, often emerging from this interstitial space, invested the state with an idealized power and knowledge—an imagined omniscience based on the state's omnipresence.

MICROFOUNDATIONS OF POWER

Kella is a place where people tend to describe themselves as "simple workers," "simple folk," or "good Catholics." Until the Wende, the majority of its residents were factory or construction workers. As part



Figure 9. Kella's chapel between the fences on a hilltop behind the village, 1985. Separated from Kella by the alarm fence, the chapel fell into the no-man's-land and was inaccessible to villagers for years. (Photograph courtesy of Gisela Lange)

of the Eichsfeld region, Kella remained devoutly Catholic despite the socialist state's attempts to root out religion in the GDR. When church services were prohibited in Kella in 1953 and 1954, for example, villagers walked ten kilometers every Sunday to attend mass in a neighboring village outside the *Schutzstreifen*. Church services in Kella resumed after that, and except for prominent SED members, who were strongly discouraged by the party from going to church, people were free to attend. Although the state had succumbed to popular demand regarding religious practices, it symbolically conveyed its ultimate authority on the issue: a pilgrimage chapel overlooking the village, completed after the end of World War II, fell into the no-man's-land between the fences and was inaccessible for more than thirty years (Figure 9).

This strong Catholic tradition formed much of the basis for opposition to the regime in Kella. Viewing the Christian and socialist doctrines as incompatible, people refused to join the Communist Party on religious

grounds. "The SED was an atheist party," one woman explained, "anyone who joined was considered scum of the earth." Whereas among the general population in East Germany one in every five adults was a party member (Jarausch 1994: 35), fewer than 6 percent of Kella's residents joined the party, and less than half of these were natives of the village. Parents also objected to the state initiation ceremony, *Jugendweihe*, for religious reasons. Intended as a secular equivalent to the Catholic first communion or Protestant confirmation, the *Jugendweihe* was a socialist rite of passage in which fourteen-year-olds were asked to swear allegiance to socialist state; around 97 percent of young East Germans participated (Smith 1985: 72). Despite persistent efforts of party officials in Kella—including special sessions of village council meetings, pressure by teachers on students in school, and home visits to parents—minutes of the village council indicate that *Jugendweihe* participation rarely exceeded 50 percent.

This is not to suggest that residents of Kella successfully avoided compliance with the regime, but rather that the church was a pocket of dissent here to which the state was, to some extent, willing to concede. By permitting a certain degree of dissent in this area—and granting it the semblance of resistance—the state was more effectively able to permeate and control other spheres of daily life. Through a multitude of political organizations and practices (often under the thinly veiled guise of social groups), the regime was able to involve many individuals in its operations.

In addition to the largely obligatory membership in work brigades, the trade union, the German-Soviet Friendship League, and, for young people, the Free German Youth (Freie Deutsche Jugend [FDJ]), residents voluntarily joined mass organizations like the Civil Defense Club, the Democratic Women's Federation (Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschlands [DFD]), the German Red Cross, the People's Solidarity League for senior citizens, and the volunteer fire department. The quarterly meetings of these groups were largely social in nature, but never free of ideological content. As in other socialist states, the function of these mass organizations was to convey the party program to target groups; Lenin had once called them "transmission belts between the party and the masses" (in Kornai 1992: 40).³

To supplement the mass organizations, more than twenty men from the village were involved in the regional *Kampfgruppe*, or People's Militia, complete with its own arsenal and commanders, which was instituted throughout the GDR after the June 1953 uprising to prevent any future riots. Another thirty residents were members of the village council, and additional membership in subcommittees increased the number of villagers engaged in local politics. All in all, such organizations were successful in involving nearly one-half of the adult population (about one member per household) in state activities and functions. Much of village social life in Kella was, then, inseparable from the state.

The workings of a centralized or "rational redistributive" economy (Konrad and Szelenyi 1979) also penetrated nearly every sphere of daily life. On the one hand were the empty store shelves and the hours spent in food lines, reminders of the constant shortage of consumer goods; on the other hand, the continuing pressure to fulfill production norms.⁴ In addition to these production norms, for which posters covered factory walls and work units were rewarded through party-organized production rituals, residents in rural areas like Kella were obligated to fulfill work requirements for the local agricultural collective as well as quotas from private agricultural production; people were required to submit prescribed quantities of vegetables, eggs, poultry, and pork to the state.⁵ Similarly, male residents of Kella were regularly enlisted in voluntary weekend work brigades to assist in community construction projects. Such "seizures of time" by the state, represented especially by shortages of goods and the resulting queues, entail what Verdery has aptly called the "etatization of time," a "time tax" that served to both enhance and display state power through the appropriation of citizens' time (1996).

Of utmost importance in the border regions was the *Ordnung und Sicherheit der Grenze* (order and security of the border), and the state was remarkably successful in coopting individuals to maintain it. When the border first became impermeable in 1952, villagers were employed to build a ten-meter-wide patrol strip. All residents were thereafter required to ask "outsiders" appearing in Kella to identify themselves; any person without the proper identification and pass was considered to be in violation of the *Grenzordnung* (order of the border) and was supposed to be reported immediately. A mayor's speech in 1967 boasted

that 60 percent of all arrests on the border that year were made by citizens themselves.

Although such figures were most likely embellished for senior state authorities, I was told of several incidents of citizen's arrests. Some of these were inadvertent: a school class, for example, that pointed and giggled at an unfamiliar couple crouching in the bushes was later awarded medals for preventing an escape. Many citizens reported activities out of fear or suspicion that the outsider was a Stasi (state security) agent sent to test villagers' compliance. In one instance I was told that a resident confronted a strange man walking back and forth so close to the border fence that the villager figured he had to be an agent. On asking the man for identification, the villager discovered he was Karl Eduard von Schnitzler, host of the infamous television show *Der schwarze Kanal* (The Black Channel) and for thirty years the GDR's leading antiwestern propagandist. Although this resident had done his duty, he was more concerned about what he had revealed by not recognizing the television host: not only that he did not watch von Schnitzler's show but also that he probably watched only western television and might thus be subject to closer scrutiny.

A variety of agents and institutions were responsible for boundary maintenance. Until a few years before the Wende, a full-time policeman (Abschnittsbevollmächtigter [ABV]) was stationed in Kella. The "local sheriff," as villagers called him, worked closely with the border police and the mayor to ensure the *Ordnung und Sicherheit der Grenze*. He was also a main source of information about Kella and its residents for Kreis officials, an agent of communication with the mysterious power of the state. Residents were never sure about the nature of his activities and duties. As a state bureaucrat, an ostensibly devoted communist, and an "outsider" (no villager ever served as an ABV), the village policeman was perceived as a known evil. People watched what they said when he was around.

Border police were draftees as well as career officers in the national army (Nationale Volksarmee [NVA]). Housed in army barracks in a neighboring village, border guards (*Grenzer*) were drawn from far outside the region in order to prevent locals from becoming familiar with the

structure and operations of the border. Their interaction with residents occurred daily at checkpoints, through binoculars from a guard tower, from an army jeep on its hourly border patrol, and even at the local bar or village festivals. Depending on the time of day and the level of border security (which was heightened whenever a "violation of the order of the border" occurred), between two and eight border guards would be present in the village at all times. Despite their obvious embodiment of state authority, border police were rarely targets of villagers' animosity. As one woman explained:

During the first years when the army was still voluntary, the relations between people and border guards were bad. . . . Mother always said, "Never go out with a Grenzer." But when the army became mandatory for all men, relations between people and the guards improved. Everyone knew it could be their own son, that they couldn't help it that they had to serve on the border. Mother sometimes brought them drinks or a slice of bread. We even brought the ones at the checkpoint chocolate for Christmas.

Despite friendly relations, however, girls were still cautioned against marrying a border guard. Although residents felt a certain empathy for the guards—as they, too, were being required to acquiesce at some level—a certain distance remained.

Much policing of citizens by other citizens was done by villagers themselves. Referred to as *Grenzhelfer* (border-guard helpers) and *Volks-polizeihelfer* (People's Police helpers), these residents patrolled the strip along the border fence (*streifenlaufen*), assisted at control checkpoints, and were supposed to report any unusual activities or strangers in the area. The twenty-six men who served as such helpers wore special armbands and were thus identifiable, as opposed to the more extreme form of self-policing, Stasi informants, who to this day remain unknown in Kella.⁶

Residents with certain occupations were frequently sought out to fulfill more informal duties of self-policing. Unbeknownst to most residents of Kella, for example, was the fact that the local bus driver, who transported more than half the village population to their workplaces in

Pfaffschwende or Heiligenstadt, was required to give guards at the control checkpoint to Kella a signal when a nonresident was aboard. According to one former party member, this kind of cooperation was essential in maintaining the Grenzordnung and helped keep Kella's statistical average for "escapes" (*Republikflucht*) comparatively low.

The reasons people give today for having joined various state organizations vary. In one unusual case, a man who had been a border guard elsewhere claimed he had enjoyed that duty so much that he continued it as a Grenzhelfer in Kella. Others simply appreciated the supplemental monthly allowance for their work as a Volkspolizeihelfer or Grenzhelfer, while some insist they did it out of good intentions—the "lesser evil defense" (Rosenberg 1995)—to protect villagers from someone who may have exercised power maliciously. Many felt forced into compliance, although the perceived gradations of compulsory versus voluntary participation are wide-ranging. I was frequently told that people became active in one organization, like the Civil Defense Club, in order to avoid being pressured into joining others.

Village activities and organizations thus ranged from officially prescribed, formally sanctioned but voluntary, compensated and uncompensated, to merely tolerated, and proscribed. As individuals struggled to make their peace with the system, they were confronted with choices, disagreed with each other about their decisions, experienced changes in their circumstances and aspirations, and often made conflicting statements about their own view of specific events and issues. In what follows, I focus on a few individuals whose histories illustrate particular degrees and measures of responsibility and complicity; the stories also show the way in which such particulars were a critical aspect of daily life in the GDR.

When I first met Thorsten Müller, a mason in his midtwenties, one of the first things I learned about him was that he had not taken part in the Jugendweihe ceremony. His former school classmate was showing me her photograph album when he joined us, and, on seeing pictures of her Jugendweihe, he joked with her about how he had not been lured into the ceremony by the promise of a trip to Hungary, as she had been. His refusal to participate was due partly to the influence of his Catholic par-

ents, he later admitted, but at the time of our first meeting it was presented as his decision. Using a slight physical disability as an excuse, Thorsten was also able to avoid mandatory military education for males in the ninth and tenth grades. He was not, however, exempted from the compulsory eighteen months of military service. Later, after he had started working in the nearby toy factory, he became active in the FDJ, motivated largely by the hope of winning a much-coveted FDJ-sponsored trip abroad. At about this time, he also became a member of the local Kampfgruppe, but he feels he was pressured into joining. "Sometimes you had little choice about things," he explained. "I was called into the factory office and asked to join the Kampfgruppe. When I said no they said I'd have to join the reserves. I still refused, but a week later I received a notice drafting me into the reserves in Berlin, so I joined the Kampfgruppe in order to stay at home." He remains convinced that this series of events was orchestrated by party officials in the factory, including his own brother-in-law.

Despite his involvement in these state organizations, Thorsten views himself as free of responsibility for having participated in the system in any way. Using categories similar to those described to me by several villagers, he explained that people who had participated were either "red" or "very red." "Red were those who joined the party in order to get ahead in their careers, to study what they wanted, or to practice a hobby," he said, citing as examples the names of several men from Kella who had joined the party in order to be permitted to hunt. "Very red were those who *really* participated: party officials, Stasi, those who went willingly to [state-sponsored] demonstrations—everyone who really believed in the system." One measure of complicity Thorsten frequently referred to, as did many villagers, was church attendance. According to Thorsten, party members who attended church fell into the "red" category and were thus viewed as hypocritical; the "really reds" demonstrated their genuine convictions by refusing to attend. While many villagers disapproved of these individuals leaving the church, ironically these "really red," who after the Wende were willing to "stand by their past," enjoy more respect in the community than do former party members who now disavow themselves from any involvement.

One of the few "really reds" is Werner Schmidt. As the leader of the

Kampfgruppe, head of the trade union and assistant mayor, he was an especially prominent party member in the village. He comes from a family with an unusual history of leftist political leanings: his father, the first mayor in Kella under the communist regime, is remembered for having said as a young man, even before the war, that his "gaze was directed toward Moscow." Werner recalls fondly the excitement he felt in the early years of the GDR: "I must admit there were things that we youths liked back then. Many of us were really excited about building the so-called new Germany." He attended the first national meeting of the FDJ in Berlin, became a party member at the age of nineteen, voluntarily joined the army for three years, and returned to Kella to become active in local politics. Although his wife is a devout church member, Werner rarely attended mass and finally left the church officially in 1984. He personally never saw a contradiction between church and party membership, but he felt forced out of the church by both sides:

I was born here, was baptized here, went to my first holy communion in April 1945, just like everyone else . . . and I never saw any conflict in attending church on Sundays. But I couldn't, because I was a party member. . . . I often sensed that many faithful churchgoers would say that all SED members—all the "reds," as one says today—those are bad people. You know, I have never counted myself among the bad people!

Now in his fifties, Werner and his family were the first to open a private restaurant in the village—nicknamed affectionately by villagers "the Red Ox," "the Red Star," or "the Kremlin" because of the family's "red" past. As we sat in his restaurant one Sunday afternoon, he explained why he refuses to be ashamed of his past:

Today some people are embarrassed or afraid to admit they once were in civil defense, or that they were a People's Police helper in the former GDR, so they don't want to mention it. Someone recently said to me here in the restaurant: "Hey, you were red, weren't you?" And I replied, "Yes, of course. Do you really believe I would lie about my thirty-six years of party membership? To say I never really agreed with it? It would seem as though I were ashamed of it." You know, I can stand by my past! After all, it's what I lived through! . . . People say: "You were in the Kampfgruppe." Of course I was in the Kampfgruppe, and for thirty years. Why

should I lie about that? I can say this to anyone openly and to their face. And for each individual resolution passed by the village council or executive committee, my signature still stands today.

Werner maintains that he tried to use his position to improve life in the community. With his assistance and leadership, roads were paved, a sewage system was installed, a new community center was built, and the village cemetery was renovated. In his capacity as assistant mayor and head of the trade union, he strove to assist and support individual villagers. In one case he was able to help a teenager from the village, Martin Schneider, who, in a drunken stupor, had attempted to escape over the fence near Kella in 1983. In his effort to avoid damaging his prized western jeans given to him by a relative who had recently returned from a brief visit to West Germany, the youth had tossed them over the fence. Before he was ready to join his pants, however, he became overcome with fear of the potential deadly consequences of his actions. Martin hurried home, leaving the jeans on the western side of the fence. He was tried for attempted unlawful border crossing, sentenced to a year in prison, and prohibited from entering the Sperrgebiet, including his hometown of Kella, for three years. The language of the state's written verdict reflected its ideology of the border: "For purposes of sentencing, it is essential to note that the defendant committed a serious offense against the state order. The permanent guarantee of the inviolability of the GDR border with the imperialist FRG [Federal Republic of Germany] is an unalterable necessity for securing peace in Europe and for the success of the principles of peaceful coexistence. The defendant disregarded this important protective function of the state border." Through a series of letters and visits to state authorities, Werner was able to have the sentence cut in half. Although he had served as "social plaintiff" in the trial, he is still admired by many in the community for his intervention on Martin's behalf.⁷

Werner is hardly aware of this respect and admiration from other members of the community, however. At the time of our conversations, he was mostly conscious of having been labeled "really red," a category he felt had placed him in the same group as Stasi informants and corrupt party officials. Shortly after the Wende, his house, along with six others

in the village, was the target of youth vandals who spray painted the facades in red with slanderous graffiti. Later, his name was forged by an unknown adversary in a letter to officials of the Treuhand (the state organization responsible for privatizing former GDR industries after reunification) in Erfurt denouncing fellow factory managers for communist sympathies and, in some cases, Stasi involvement. "Words can kill people, you know! Worse than with a weapon sometimes," he said, raising an issue to which he would frequently return in our conversations. "You can't just say, 'Hey, you or you or you! Since you were a party member, you were also working for the Stasi.' And you don't even have to prove it, it's that simple. This is a dangerous thing."

Also disturbing to Werner was what he perceived to be a general devaluation of the GDR past by western Germany, exemplified by the portrayal of East German factories as "only inefficient and desolate," the discrediting of the GDR educational system, including discussions about whether to honor East German diplomas, the condemnation of all aspects of the socialist system by the victors of the cold war, and above all, the frequent comparison of the East German to the Nazi regime: "Today there are attempts in the press to claim the GDR, in its forty years of existence, was worse than National Socialism. This just can't be done! National Socialism declared war on the world, it cost 50 million people their lives! . . . This isn't how you overcome the past, even school kids know that." Another aspect of the devaluation of the past, he felt, was the dismissal of capable and experienced people simply because they were party members.

I learned many things through my involvement in the state—anyone would agree with that—but this doesn't mean, just because I was red, that I'm an enemy of the new social order! People want to put us on ice, to brand us and put us to the side and say, "Look, that's them!" If they think they can get along without us then, please, go ahead, but I don't think it's good.

Since the Wende, Werner has not been involved in local politics. Forced into early retirement like many men his age, he largely keeps to himself and concentrates on the new family business.

Ursula Meyer does not fall easily into either category of complicity. Although considered "really red" by many members of the community because of her tenure as village mayor between 1980 and 1990, others perceive her as an opportunist. Several people who know about her church activities see her not as hypocritical, as many do, but as courageous and defiant. In a sense, Ursula is all of these things. After working as a secretary in the mayor's office for nearly twenty years, she was asked by the local party leadership to take over for her boss when he retired. She accepted the job, hoping to help the community as well as to eradicate the mismanagement and corruption she says she witnessed as a secretary. As mayor of a border village, however, she was required to join the SED and was strongly discouraged from attending church. It was a compromise that she was, at the time, willing to make: "I became mayor around 1980, and at the time there was this rule that every mayor in the *Schutzstreifen* had to be in the party and wasn't allowed to go to church. . . . I thought, well, OK, I'll become mayor—that was certainly a wrong compromise, but I did have a few good intentions. I told myself I could help these people, these little people who are so often treated unjustly." Ursula stopped going to church for years but resumed with the encouragement of a new village priest. Despite Kreis officials' warnings, she was persistent and began participating, although at first secretly, in church council excursions to Czechoslovakia. In 1988, she supplied state materials to covertly erect a crucifix on the community boundary, an act of considerable courage.

When the Wall fell in 1989, Ursula was at the forefront of village festivities. She helped organize a candlelight demonstration calling for a border crossing in Kella; when the fence was opened at the end of December, on her fiftieth birthday, she planned festivities for Kella and its neighboring villages to the west, complete with a brass band, bratwurst, and plenty of mulled wine. She remained mayor until the municipal elections in May 1990, when she ran for reelection "to see whether the people really wanted me, or whether I was mayor because the state chose me." Although she was reelected by a margin of two to one over the second-place candidate, Ursula was later ousted at the first meeting of the new, Christian Democratic Union-dominated village council.⁸ "So this is de-

mocracy," she remembers thinking, "the candidate favored by the people doesn't win." Then, recalling the pain of that experience, her eyes filled with tears, and she whispered, "When I think about how hard I worked, how I fought for every little thing, how happy I was when I could help. And now to think that was all wrong. Everything I did! For this village! I didn't necessarily want that [communist] system, but simply to help make life somewhat more bearable for the people here." Today Ursula rarely participates in community functions outside the church. When the village put on a parade in celebration of German re-unification on October 3, 1990, Ursula left town. Whereas her doorbell and telephone used to ring frequently while she was mayor, she is now visited only by close friends. She is the first to admit to being oversensitive to outside judgment, and although many residents believe she was treated unfairly by the village council, others believe she was rightly punished. "Ursula shouldn't have kept her support for the church a secret," one villager said to me. "That has hurt her now. . . . I can't forgive her for joining the party."

In their own ways, Werner, Ursula, and even Thorsten have struggled to come to terms with a devalued past. For Ursula this struggle has been intensely personal, burdened by a guilt for having participated in the system at the expense of her religious convictions, yet defensive because a part of her still believes in the ideals it represented and the work she was able to accomplish. Werner has wrestled not with a personal guilt about his own past but with the widespread derogation of the East German experience, which he associates with choices he has made in his own life. Some would argue that Thorsten, through his membership in the FDJ and Kampfgruppe, also helped sustain the system. I frequently heard, particularly from former party members, that "everyone somehow participated," whether by attending town meetings, joining a mass organization, or simply hanging out a flag on state holidays. Or, as one man put it, "everything was spread out to the smallest element [of society]. Each person had a duty that served to strengthen the backbone of the state." The degrees, gradations, and shading of complicity vary from case to case, often with different standards for self and others, often context-dependent. Together, these individual stories reflect the complex and contradictory aspects of the way in which the system was negotiated, interpreted, and reproduced.

CONTROLLING DISSENT

The state's ability to create spaces for dissent, to bound and control it, and finally to force citizens to draw their own boundaries was instrumental in the affirmation of the regime. In addition to engaging a large number of residents from a variety of political backgrounds—from active SED party members to "partyless," church-going women—the regional political structure was also able to give people a sense of having a voice at a local level. In practice, however, the very existence of certain state-sponsored pockets of dissent conveyed an understanding that one's voice was ultimately controlled: in the end, the state had the final say.

Involvement in community decision making is one reason many residents chose to be members of the village council. Although the number of candidates for the seats allotted to each party by the state (majority SED) never exceeded the thirty seats available, and although much of the council's duties entailed formally approving resolutions and plans handed to it by the state, there was some room for initiative and the ventilation of grievances. Special subcommittees dealt with issues regarding housing allocation, building permits, village social activities, and the supply of material goods to the village. When a family wanted to add on to their house, for example, they went to the Committee on Building and Housing for permission. When there were complaints about the quality and quantity of meat available in the Konsum store, grievances were filed with the Committee on Retail and Supply, which then dealt with the proper authorities. Their ability to answer grievances depended on the response of Kreis officials, but frequently they were able to affect change, at least in the short term. The construction of a new community building to house the mayor's office, a day-care center, a hair salon, and meeting rooms, for example, was the initiative of the village council, under both Ursula's and Werner's leadership. Furthermore, members of the village council were responsible for heading neighborhood meetings and for initiating dialogues with neighboring households in order to discuss residents' concerns in a more intimate setting. They were required to inform the village council of their findings, and reports listing the frequency of such meetings and number of participants were submitted monthly to state authorities. Ursula later reflected on the usefulness of such public

forums, particularly in light of the fact that village council meetings today are usually held behind closed doors: "I think that when people came together [in these meetings] they had a chance to say something and that this would also be taken into consideration. Today this opportunity no longer exists . . . even the women's [DFD] meetings. We used to argue and discuss a lot, and what is there today? The hair salon, for example, that materialized because the women sat together and discussed it and decided how we could do it. People were simply listened to more." Ursula's comment reveals her sense of having had a voice in local government—a sentiment I heard from other villagers as well. She failed to see, however, a certain irony in her statement: people were "listened to more" not only to appease small grievances but also as a means of control.

Einwohnerversammlungen (town meetings) and the closely related *Eingaben*, legally sanctioned complaints, are additional examples of this. Held on a quarterly basis, *Einwohnerversammlungen* were generally well visited; people were concerned that attendance was taken and that an absence could be punished later by being denied building materials, travel to the West, or permission to receive visits from relatives who lived outside Kella. After several speeches by regional (Kreis) and community (*Gemeinde*) officials, participants were encouraged to ask questions and/or register complaints. Although most residents do not recall these obligatory meetings fondly, many do recall—and today miss—the opportunity for critique. Expressing her feelings of loss and confusion, one woman complained to a group of friends: "We don't know where to go anymore when we have problems or concerns. We have to figure everything out for ourselves, and I think this will take a while to learn."

Complaints at these meetings usually pertained to a lack of building materials, services, or consumer goods supplied to the village, specific cases where travel to the West was denied, poor quality of foods, or suggestions for community improvement. As expressions of both dissatisfaction and loyalty, grievances voiced at these meetings were frequently submitted as formal *Eingaben*, although these could be filed through the mayor's office as well. A typical *Eingabe* might concern the delivery of a washing machine: if a family had been allotted a machine but had not yet received it, they would file a complaint. Eventually the distribution man-

ager at the washing-machine factory would be contacted, and, after several months, the machine would arrive. Many *Eingaben* in Kella were related to the small factory there. In one instance, for example, the employees filed a grievance to have a flush toilet installed. Other *Eingaben*, such as requests for a paved road or a street lamp, could drag on for years. Occasionally, residents who filed complaints involving the rejection of visa applications for western travel were able to obtain permission to visit the West. This was rare, however; most decisions regarding travel to the West were final, with no explanation provided by the state.

Eingaben were taken very seriously by authorities.⁹ As a means of control (Borneman 1993), they not only kept tabs on petitioners but also underscored the state's ultimate authority. *Eingaben* thus reflected what Charles Maier has called the regime's principle of governance through rationing and privilege (Maier 1997): by rationing travel to the West, for example, the state made the granting of a pass a privilege. The response to grievances also served to appease residents of the *Schutzstreifen*, who were given priority for materials and were kept better supplied than were those in communities outside the *Sperrgebiet*. Furthermore, *Eingaben* were viewed as a way to win residents' trust and involvement in the regime. As a typical mayor's report in the 1970s stated, "Through the tips, suggestions and *Eingaben*, our citizens will contribute simultaneously to improving the work of local agencies and to pulling them into the social mass political work in the community. . . . By resolving *Eingaben* of our citizens we will continue to win people's trust in the state and thereby make our own work easier." Most *Eingaben* were resolved, and all were responded to even if the petitioner's wishes were not granted. One resident recalled how these *Eingaben* and gatherings allowed for "open critique" of the state: "In the meetings we would say, for example, 'Listen, we can't meet the production norms if the state doesn't make sure the materials are there.' That was a violent critique."

The fact that this resident viewed complaints about lack of materials as a "violent critique" is indicative of an awareness of certain unstated limits, boundaries that were constantly negotiated in everyday life. People did not submit *Eingaben* complaining about the border fence or guard tower, for example, but they did file a complaint if travel to the West was denied. Residents did not directly oppose the party or its poli-

cies, but they did circumvent overtly political complaints by personally criticizing the officials who embodied them. One man who prides himself on being viewed as "black" in his political and religious orientation explained to me: "I learned to voice my opposition by criticizing individuals rather than the party itself. I couldn't be attacked for that."¹⁰

This language of protestation was part of a shared knowledge. One town meeting erupted in such anger toward a Kreis official that participants vowed publicly not to attend any more meetings when that particular official was present. "You could actually say anything," another villager maintained. "It was *how* you said it that mattered." Even the simple mention in the *Ortschronik* (official village chronicle) of a curfew extension in 1984 for a village festival could contain an implicit criticism: rather than complaining about the limitations of the regular curfew, the chronicle describes the positive consequences of extending it.¹¹

Perhaps the most radical critique of the regime was voiced during Fasching.¹² In a festive setting, participants performed skits, speeches, and songs poking fun at fellow villagers as well as at the regime. Although most performances consisted of largely bawdy humor, including cross-dressing, exemplified by the popular *Männerballett* (men's ballet), or were parodies of village events and residents, there were always a few acts that were explicitly critical of the state. In one song performed in the mid-1980s, two young women lamented the restrictions on mobility imposed on residents of the village:

I am a girl from the Zone.¹³ I live in Kella, where this world ends.
I have a nice house with a garden, a car and money to spend.
But despite the town's pub, Kirmes, and Fasching, I feel so alone.
I dream of the beautiful cities, of Dallas, of Denver, that's where
I want to roam!

A prince must come and my dreams fulfill,
to satisfy my passion for the world, he will!
In a fancy car he will come this way,
And in my ear he will quietly say . . . But wait!
Without a special pass from the state
he'll never get past Kella's checkpoint gate!¹⁴

Even in this unique space for critique, however, dissent was controlled, delimited, and bounded. In fact, the most politically critical

speeches were delivered by party members themselves. Each year that Ursula Meyer, who had a penchant for writing clever and witty rhymes, was mayor, she gave a performance that was one of the highlights of the program. Many of her speeches were critical of things not usually discussed publicly: the need for special passes to enter Kella, the difficulty in obtaining police clearance for visitors from outside the village, the hassles of a planned economy, or the need for bribe money to have an automobile repaired. In one speech entitled "The Dreamer," Ursula portrayed a series of visions that came to her in a dream:

Then I saw the fence, it was like cotton,
And nobody thought the border guards were rotten.
About Braunrode, nobody even had a thought
Because people went to Eschwege via Eisenach.¹⁵

In a 1983 skit as the village chronicler, she criticized the village's present situation by comparing it with ancient times. Noting the hassles of daily life that did not exist back then—the border fence, the Sperrgebiet, queues in front of the store, the shortage of consumer goods, the planned economy—she alluded to the existence of informers within the village: "[In these times] people did not tattle or inform, thus creating within the village a terrible storm."¹⁶

Although critical in tone, these speeches were also about control (and had to be approved by state censors). Complaining about the existence of informers also suggests they were there. Poking fun at attendance at *Einwohnerversammlungen* reminds people that this was noted. Ursula's skit as village chronicler concluded by stressing how much better things were "at the beginning of the world," a challenge to the frequent reference to Kella as "the end of the world." Like other performances in this socially constituted and state-sanctioned space for dissent, it was both a criticism and an affirmation of the regime.

SUSTAINING THE UNKNOWN

One of the regime's most effective means of control was a culture of secrecy that forced its citizens to test the limits of the possible and

thereby aid in setting them. As the carnival celebrations demonstrate, people's actions were both subversive and constraining: they challenged the forms of control while defining the limits of power. In his writings on discipline and surveillance, Michel Foucault has pointed to the mutual dynamic of power relations: "Although surveillance rests on individuals, its functioning is that of a network of relations from top and bottom, but also to a certain extent from bottom to top and laterally; this network 'holds' the whole together and traverses it in its entirety with effects of power that derive from one another: supervisors, perpetually supervised" (1979: 175). His description of Bentham's panopticon also illustrates the function of the unknown in maintaining control: "The inmate cannot see whether or not the guardian is in the tower, so he must behave as if surveillance were perpetual and total. If the prisoner is never sure when he is being observed, he becomes his own guardian" (Rabinow 1984: 19). Rather than viewing the state's power as totalizing, therefore, it may be more useful to conceptualize it as a dialectical interplay between above and below, to explore how daily interaction helped stabilize the state.

In the space between the boundaries of the known, or *Zwischenraum*, people sought to interpret events that might tell them what the unknown was. Everyone knew, for example, the potentially fatal consequences of an attempted escape over the border. After the arrest and imprisonment of Martin Schneider in 1983, they could also surmise the consequences of an aborted escape. They could even guess the repercussions of criticism of the border voiced in the presence of unknown informants after a local bus driver spent ten months in prison for comparing the border intensifications in the 1970s to the "Warsaw Ghetto." However, residents did not know what would happen if they were caught waving to relatives on the western side of the fence (although they knew it was forbidden), so they pretended to clean windows or to shake out tablecloths. Everyone knew they were supposed to hang out the GDR flag on state holidays, but they learned through experimentation that one could resist this a bit by hanging it out the back door, invisible to the West for whom the display was intended; or they wedged it between windows instead of placing it in the flag post and were secretly pleased when the wind blew

the flag onto the window sill. Like the language of shared protestation, such practices were part of a kind of "hidden transcript," a "critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (Scott 1990: xii) that simultaneously tested and contested the authority of the regime. They also reflect what Czeslaw Milosz, in *The Captive Mind*, once eloquently described as *ketman*. An Arabic term and Islamic concept meaning "hidden," *ketman* entails the simultaneous public affirmation and private deception by citizens under socialism that produces a sense of pride and feeling of superiority over those in power who are being deceived: "Ketman in its narrowest and severest forms is widely practiced in the people's democracies. As in Islam, the feeling of superiority over those who are unworthy of attaining truth constitutes one of the chief joys of people whose lives do not in general abound in pleasures" (Milosz 1991: 52).

An inconsistent use of state power was especially effective in sustaining a sense of the unknown. The state gave no reason for denying requests to travel West, thus forcing applicants to search for one.¹⁷ Had they not attended enough *Einwohnerversammlungen*? Should they have become involved in the village council? Although state policy may well have been guided by caprice rather than reason, residents' assumption that something knowable was being withheld by state design, ultimately on the basis of "reason," both reflected and contributed to an idealization of the regime's power. The seemingly arbitrary approval or denial of such requests—sometimes different decisions were rendered within the same immediate family—fostered resentment and suspicion among people in the village. (What had someone else done to have his or her request approved?) Suspicion was also raised when a resident was treated leniently on a crime he or she was known to have committed. A common example cited are cases when one person's driver's license was reinstated immediately but another resident's was revoked for two years for the same crime.

Such actions created the perception that everything the state did was calculated, and residents struggled to decode its logic. In one case, a woman from Kella went all the way to East Berlin in search of a reason for the denial of her application to attend her brother's silver wedding

anniversary in West Germany. Emma Hauser had been granted a pass to visit western siblings several years earlier and thus could not understand why she was being prohibited from traveling this time. When the six Eingaben she submitted to the mayor's office failed to bring about a reversal of the decision, she appealed to SED leaders in the Kreis administration. On the back of her son's small moped, she traveled thirty kilometers to the county seat of Heiligenstadt, hoping for approval of her application. Her appeal was again rejected, and her son, seeing his mother's despair, resolved to take her to East Berlin that day. For someone who, like the rest of her generation in the village, rarely ventured far from home, this was no small feat; it was the only time Emma had visited the nation's capital.

After an all-night train ride the mother and son arrived in the city, not sure what to expect but hopeful that their appeal would be approved. When they were informed by an official at the Interior Ministry that the decision would not be reversed, Emma asked if it was because of her involvement in the church, adding, for the official's information, that she attended church regularly. As Emma recounted this story to me, her normally cheerful demeanor turned solemn. She slowed her eager and rapid speech as she recalled how the official responded to her: "Frau Hauser, you don't need to tell me anything. We know everything." She and her son left, defeated and certain that she was being punished for her active church involvement. To this day, Emma harbors resentment and suspicions about who in the village, if anyone, is responsible for this decision made nearly ten years ago. It is the one reason she briefly considered applying for access to her Stasi file.¹⁸

The most critical event to produce fear and suspicion of the regime among villagers was the deportation of several families from Kella in 1952. This action was the result of a politburo decision on May 13, 1952, to create a "special regime on the demarcation line" (Potratz 1993: 60). According to this resolution,¹⁹ the border between the GDR and the FRG was to be additionally fortified through the creation of a security zone consisting of the 500-meter-wide Schutzstreifen and 5-kilometer-wide Sperrgebiet, as well as through the evacuation of residents from the following groups: foreigners; people who were not registered with the po-

lice; convicted criminals; and "people who because of their position in or toward society pose a threat to the antifascist, democratic order."²⁰

In an action termed "Operation Vermin," more than 8,369 people (approximately 2 percent of the entire Sperrgebiet population) were evacuated from the Sperrgebiet into the GDR interior during late May and early June 1952 (Potratz 1993: 63). Regional police, together with officers of the recently founded Stasi, were responsible for drawing up the lists of those slated for deportation.

Most villagers will now claim that all five families who left that day in the spring of 1952 were forcibly evacuated. In fact, only two families were deported; three others left voluntarily early in the day out of fear of deportation. According to what has now become legend, Heinz Müller, a *Großbauer* (independent farmer with ten to twenty hectares of land and draft animals) from Kella, discovered a note in his stable when he went to fetch his cattle that morning. His son, also named Heinz Müller, recalled what the note had said: "Heinz! You must leave. And quickly." Rumors spread rapidly through the village, and four other families were allegedly warned by the well-meaning mayor, who had received advance notice of the planned deportations.²¹ Three of these families, all *Großbauern*, gathered their members, their livestock, and as many of their possessions as possible and brought them to the other side of the border. Later that night relatives from the village smuggled clothes, bedding, and other supplies to them. Heinz remembers spending the night with his family and their twenty cows, six horses, and a wagon on the Braunrode hill overlooking the village. Like many former villagers, all three families who left voluntarily that day settled in the neighboring western village of Grebendorf, only three kilometers from Kella.

Two of the families who were reportedly warned, the local innkeeper and an especially vocal carpenter, refused to believe the rumor. "I haven't done anything wrong. They can't take me away," a villager remembers one of them saying. Later that day, state officials appeared at their doors, and the families were ordered to leave, taking with them only the things that would fit into the state's truck. They were evacuated to a region near Halle (GDR) and later emigrated to West Germany on exit visas.

It is a day that remains indelibly etched in the memories of villagers. People can remember exactly where they were when they heard the news. Heinz's cousin was a child at the time and remembers returning to Kella with a friend after buying shoes in Eschwege:

We bought the shoes and then started heading home. In Grebendorf, I remember clearly, the women there who knew me approached us and said, "You Kellsche girls! You're horsing around down here! Everyone in Kella's been evacuated! No one's there anymore!" So we ran up the hill [toward Kella]. Ach! It was terrible. We thought that when we got there everyone would be gone. And then our relatives were sitting up there with their horses and wagon and I asked my aunt if it were true that everyone had left Kella. "Only us," she said.

It is still not known whether the three families who left voluntarily were truly slated for evacuation; nor is it known why the two deported families were forced to leave while other landholders and vocal opponents of the regime were permitted to stay. So the criteria for evacuation, the definition of the people who posed a threat "in and toward society," remained—and remains—unknown.²² People were left to speculate: several families had been large property owners; one was particularly vocal in their opposition to the regime; one had been a Nazi party member; two others owned private businesses. The uncertainty created by this action encouraged, indeed demanded, acquiescence. As one woman recalled: "That [1952] was the beginning, when people became quiet and thought, 'We'll take everything in stride so that we can stay here.' This is why so many people participated [in the system]."

Although no one was deported from Kella after 1952, there was a similar round of evacuations from the Schutzstreifen, including neighboring border villages, in 1961; the last deportation of a family from the region was as recent as 1978. The expression "up the sand road," referring to the only road leading out of Kella, became synonymous with forced deportation—and with fear. Emma Hauser remembered struggling with this unknown threat, especially during moments of noncompliance: "Here in the Sperrgebiet we were always threatened with having to go up the sand road. And I was always scared." Emma admits that her family was never directly threatened with deportation, but she maintains that the fear was

always present. Today she, like several other villagers, is proud to claim they were on "the list" of families to be expelled inland or placed in an internment camp—although to my knowledge there has been no confirmation of the existence of such a deportation list.

A culture of secrecy and publicity was thus produced and sustained by an alliance of the unknown and the highly visible, both united in the all encompassing "them" (*die*, the term used in referring to any aspect of the state ranging from village party members to Kreis officials to the politburo).²³ This dynamic encouraged people to invest the state with an exaggerated aura of power and knowledge. The existence of monthly information reports submitted to Kreis authorities by the mayor was well known, for example, but people imagined its contents to be much more extensive and damaging than the mundane details of daily life the reports actually described.²⁴ Similarly, people knew each citizen had a dossier containing letters and reports by work supervisors that passed from employer to employer when a person changed jobs. During the socialist period, these dossiers remained inaccessible to employees and were imagined to contain secretive and damaging detailed material. On receipt of these dossiers with the closing of socialist factories after the Wende, people were shocked at their innocuousness: the majority of files contained little more than a listing of dates of employment and an occasional report on an employee's productivity. Furthermore, many residents believed that the mayor, the embodiment of the state at the most local level, was responsible for decisions regarding western travel when, in fact, this was decided at the Kreis level, probably arbitrarily.

Immediately after the Wende, villagers organized and signed a petition to reveal the ultimate unknown, local Stasi informants, imagining that there was an orderly list readily available on demand and that Kella's mayor had access to it. Revelations in the national press after the opening of the Stasi archives have since demonstrated this could not have been the case. As Verdery has pointed out, the presence of informers and collaborators, as well as citizens' knowledge of the existence of these files, created an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust that helped sustain state power; the purpose of the files, she writes, was to produce "political subjects and subject dispositions useful to the regime" (1996: 24).

Imaginary lists, empowered mayors, and illusory malicious monthly

reports are indicative not only of an idealized state power but also of the way in which people created their own sense of order out of the unknown. Like the boundaries of the possible, this sense of order was negotiated collectively. Most important was the ability to ascertain the "trustworthy" members of the community. As one woman explained, "We knew the people in the village, and those that I didn't know, I never let get close to me. I never told strangers what I really thought. But within the village, you knew the people. The people whose houses were spray painted after the *Wende*, those were the ones we all suspected." Several villagers described a strong sense of community among most residents, constructed and defined in opposition to those suspected of Stasi involvement. "It was, you could say, like a big family against a small family," one man recalled, "You knew who you were up against." How accurate this sense of order was remains to be seen; it may yet be challenged if villagers choose to file for access to their Stasi files.

CONCLUSION

Secrecy, as Michael Geyer has observed, "was more than an attribute of a particular organization. It became a mode of conducting politics in the GDR" (Geyer n.d.). The success of this secrecy was partly the product of the public nature and omnipresence of the regime in all realms of daily life—the product, in a sense, of the state as a symbolic force. Publicity made the secrecy imaginable and thus compelling. It contributed to an idealization of state power and the perception of the state as something that had to be interpreted. A skit performed at carnival, an Eingabe submitted at a town meeting, a flag hung on a state holiday, or a clandestine greeting to a relative across the border are typical of the daily practices, often within the *Zwischenraum* between the known and the unknown, that not only sought to interpret the regime's power and its limits but also helped define and sustain them. Although this kind of *Zwischenraum* operated in some form throughout the GDR, it most likely functioned more completely in *Schutzstreifen* villages like Kella because of the threat of deportation into the interior regions of East Ger-

many. Indeed, the deportations may have been inspired by nothing more than the regime's decision to demonstrate its arbitrary power and thus to instill fear and exercise control. It became the ultimate sanction, for it separated people from their *Heimat* and all that was imaginable—hence the need for careful, accurate definition of the boundaries of dissent.

There is no question that state-level practices and rituals facilitated the reproduction of socialism and, ultimately, contributed to its demise (Burawoy and Lukács 1992; Kideckel 1993; Verdery 1996; Watson 1994). However, the role of everyday life as a source of simultaneous contestation and affirmation of the regime also deserves consideration, and further exploration, if we are to understand socialist society in the GDR as well as other in other eastern European countries.²⁵ Indeed, important cultural practices and forms of negotiation emerged out of the interpenetrations of—and spaces between—state and society (Hann 1993; Wedel 1992), public and private, above and below. Such practices and negotiations both helped constitute state power and contributed to its collapse.