Working the Passage: East German Border Checkpoints, 1961–90. The Case of *GÜSt Bahnhof Friedrichstraße*, Berlin

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Abstract

In East Germany (GDR) the aim of total control of society occupied both: those on the 'heights of command' and the various 'organs' of the ruling party (SED) and state. In this pursuit efforts to strictly regulate any passage of the border of state (Staatsgrenze) had a very high priority. The formal closure of the border to the 'West' (on 13 August 1961) marked an ultimate step placing border control among the pivotal political necessities of the GDR. In this vein, the actual staffing of the remaining checkpoints by employees of the Ministry of State Security (MfS) underlined the dominant logic of encompassing surveillance and intervention, whether concealed or openly. This article focuses on one location at the centre of the 'capital of the GDR', the check point: Grenzübergangsstelle (GÜSt) Bahnhof Friedrichstraße. The goal is an inspection of the actual activities of the border guards: how did they 'do it'? The spectrum ranges from the physical and architectural settings to the locks and the protocols of control to the practices of the guards who checked (and decided) on personal identities. To what extent were rank and file in the checking booths (and behind the scenes) in charge of opening or closing the door? Who, in the last instance, allowed or denied access or exit? Certainly, customs control and related checks of personal belongings of visitors or travellers were an integral part of the 'Grenzregime'; yet they are not part of this investigation. More generally: does the analysis of the everyday of control as 'work' provide insights into both the intensities and the duration of domination in the GDR? Is GÜSt Bahnhof Friedrichstraße also a symbol of the limits if not the demise of (the work of) domination 'in the colours of the GDR'?

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Keywords

In recent times, it is the nation-state or its division, if not disintegration, which frames understandings of borders. Until 1989–90, the case of the two Germanies stood out in Europe. The infamous Berlin Wall embodied the goal of its designers: to completely seal off East Berlin and, more generally, the 'German Democratic Republic' (GDR). From 1961, the Berlin Wall and similar barricades erected by East German authorities alongside the German–German border became the epitome of a rigid if not lethal border regime. This border evolved as the ultimate proof and symbol of the Cold War division between the Socialist Bloc, led by the Soviet Union, and the Western alliance under American tutelage.

In this context, the border between North and South Korea fits even more the notion of closed borders. Yet, interestingly the complete closure of this border does not rule out the exception of Kaesong, the Industrial Zone where North and South Korea have cooperated over a dozen years, occasional disruptions notwithstanding. Beyond Cold War legacies, the ever-increasing fortification of the US-side of its border with Mexico shows the continuous valence of hardening a boundary, as does the wall the Israeli government erected to cut off Palestine. Another case in point is the current beefing-up of external borders by the states of the European Union (EU) to hold back so–called 'illegal migrants'. These examples demonstrate violence as an inherent element of the controls executed at these borders.[1]

In all these cases the focus is on the strict enforcement of sovereignty claims directed to one's own people and to the external world. In turn, the agents of the governing authorities operate on a fundamental binary that distinguishes 'us' – the loyal citizens – from 'them' abroad, the possibly hostile people. To protect and, in fact, to contain 'us' and keep 'them' out is demanding rigorous measures. Hence fortifications and killings of trespassers (or escapes, whether successful or not) have framed perceptions of these borders – as did the spectacular demolition of the

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1 As to the two Koreas and their occasional cooperations see also their joint pavilion at the Venice Architectural Biennale 2014, see *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (7 June 2014), 13. For the US–Mexico border see J. Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the 'Illegal Alien' and the Remaking of the US–Mexico Boundary* (New York, NY 2002); R.H. McGuire, 'Steel Walls and Picket Fences: Rematerializing the U.S.–Mexican Border in Ambos Nogales', *American Anthropologist*, 115, 3 (2013), 466–80. On Israel and Palestine see G. Algazi, 'Sperrzonen und Grenzfälle. Beobachtungen zu Herrschaft und Gewalt im kolonialen Kontext zwischen Israel und Palästina', in A. Lüdtke and M. Wildt (eds), S*taats-Gewalt: Ausnahmezustand und Sicherheitsregimes. Historische Perspektiven* (Göttingen 2008), 309–46, especially 332–46. On the EU-borders see D. Vicherat Mattar, 'Did Walls Really Come Down? Contemporary Bordering Walls in Europe', in M. Silberman, K.E. Till and J. Ward (eds), *Walls, Borders, Boundaries. Spatial and Cultural Practices in Europe* (New York, NY and Oxford 2012), 77–93; the latter reference I owe to an anonymous colleague who reviewed the text for this journal; see D. Fassin, 'Policing Borders, Producing Boundaries. The Governmentality of Immigration in Dark Times', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40 (July 2011), 213–26.

Berlin Wall in the winter of 1989–90. In their Manichean gist these perceptions inherently limit the possibilities of recognizing the complexities of 'making' and 'doing border'. Thus, the sealing of borders to demonstrate sovereignty ignores the multiple facets of *actual practices at the border*, from checking procedures to vagaries of travellers or visitors who are seeking entrance or exit.

Against this tendency to understand such borders in their most general features, this article will trace the *situative practices* at the border by focusing on the example of Grenzübergangsstelle Bahnhof Friedrichstraße (GÜSt) in Berlin, from 1961 to 1990. The archives of the former GDR-border control units (*Passkontrolleinheiten*, PKE) are rich in documentation of the everyday at the border – the wealth of material reveals the unsettled dilemma of core institutions of sovereignty and their aspirations to protect and contain 'one's own people' while excluding everyone apparently alien or foreign.

The German–German border began to emerge in the late 1940s. What had been the demarcation line between the Soviet and the Western zones of occupation after Nazi Germany's defeat in 1945 turned step by step into a closely guarded line of division between East and West. Under Soviet tutelage East German authorities enforced both the clearance of a border zone and a non-trespassing policy bolstered by armed border guards.[2] Thus, during the Cold War this border became part of and symbol for the confrontation of East and West: secluding state socialisms Soviet style from Western paths of inter-relating capitalism and parliamentary rule.

In the 1950s the (East) 'German Democratic Republic' (GDR) pursued a border regime that inhibited or, at least, strictly channelled contacts to or exchanges with the western Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). The approach of the West German government was different. The official Western line maintained the non-existence of East Germany as a sovereign state, even after the Brandt-Scheel government recognized the East German government in 1970–2.[3] Still, Western agencies treated the German–German border as an administrative demarcation and not as a state border proper. Hence, according to Western law it was perfectly legal for every German to cross this line in either direction without any border-check.

A special case was Berlin. The Four Allies had established a quadripartite control of the former German capital. Here, the German population moved freely back and forth between the four sectors. German police were entitled to inspect – and possibly to reject – every German who would enter or exit their respective sector. Billy Wilder, the Austrian-emigre film director at Hollywood, in his feature film 'One, Two, Three' captured this rather open situation in Berlin prior to the sealing

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2 I. Bennewitz and R. Potratz, *Zwangsaussiedlungen an der innerdeutschen Grenze: Analysen und Dokumente* (4th edn, Berlin 2012)
3 The Treaty of Moscow between the FRG and the USSR (December 1970) explicitly mentioned the GDR. The ensuing Basic Treaty between the two German governments of December 1972 established regular official channels between the two governments, thus also sealing a treaty on the transit to and from West-Berlin: see C.-U. Werner (ed.), *Brückenschlag zur deutschen Einheit?Der Grundlagenvertrag von 1972 und die deutsch-deutschen Beziehungen 1969–1990* (Potsdam 1998).

of the border on 13 August 1961. This film was shot in summer 1961 and presented a playful and rather comical picture of 'direct' exchanges between East and West: The daughter of the chief of Coca Cola company (from Atlanta) befriends a staunch East German lad, of course a ferocious communist who demonstrates his virility not the least by mastering a motorbike and criss-crossing from East to West and back again and, thus, taking back and forth his young bride.

However, beyond the film screen such criss-crossings were less leisurely. The East German authorities desperately sought to stop mass migration and refuge of tens of thousands to the West every year (totalling up to three million until 1961, while less than half a million people had migrated from the West to the East in the same decade).[4] In August 1961 the GDR-authorities shifted gear: In the early morning of Sunday 13 August they declared the border in Berlin and, in general, between East and West Germany as completely sealed. In Berlin police and workers' militias (*Betriebskampfgruppen*) put up barricades of barbed wire and began to erect a wall from bricks. Only a few weeks later they switched to pre-fabricated segments of concrete. Similar action was taken at the full length of the German–German border. Nobody should ever again cross this border without permit or unchecked. For those 'happy few' who were permitted into (or out of) East Berlin's eight checkpoints should provide entrance to and exit from the 'Capital of the GDR'.

East German officials emphasized that enhancing fortification would bolster the border's protective function: only then the border would shield peaceful easterners from onslaughts and subversion by Western imperialists and fascists. In turn, the label East German representatives staunchly used until 1989 was the '*anti-fascist protection wall*'. Moreover, both public statements and internal memos reiterated one *basso continuo*: comprehensive border control and strict regimentation of passage was nothing exceptional among 'civilized states' and, therefore, completely 'normal'. Accordingly, since the mid-1960s claims of administering a 'modern border' were part and parcel of the self-presentation of the GDR as a well-composed blend of statehood and modernity.[5] Not surprisingly, this line ran against a main *topos* of official West German political rhetoric. Until the late 1960s most leading political figures in the West joined ranks in denouncing the GDR as reigned by 'wall and barbed wire'. Or, as Willy Brandt, a leading Social Democrat and at that time Lord Mayor of West Berlin, had put it with full-fledged Cold War-scorn on 13 August 1961, a few hours after the

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4 A. Hartmann, *Grenzgeschichten: Berichte aus dem deutschen Niemandsland* (Frankfurt am Main 1990); for numbers compare V. Ackermann, *Der 'echte' Flüchtling: deutsche Vertriebene und Flüchtlinge aus der DDR 1945 – 1961* (Osnabrück 1995).

5 D. Shears, *The Ugly Frontier* (London 1970), 57–76 'on the modern border', i.e. the renovated Berlin Wall; cf. Landespolizeidirektion [West-]Berlin, 19 November 1976, status report on the 'Ring um Berlin', Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB), B Rep 002/ 27461, 146–67, 162 sketch on 'the modern border' (*moderne Grenze*). If the latter term was created or used by East Germans is unclear. A Wikipedia reference to the GDR-weekly *Volksarmee* (1965, 51) is wrong (2 July 2014), a check of the digitized *Neues Deutschland*, the authoritative daily newspaper of the *SED*, produced zero hits (22 June 2014).

news broke that 'the East' was sealing its borders: 'This is the wall of a concentration camp'.[6]

After August 1961 not everybody in the GDR accepted the new 'border regime' (*Grenzregime*, in East German terminology). In particular, young male adults, but also a fair number of young females, tried to 'break through' – as the East German authorities labelled their efforts to get out. Those who survived unsuccessful attempts or, more in numbers, who were caught even before they could approach the last fence suffered severe prison sentences of three to five years.

It took years until the border regime gradually changed, at least on the level of pragmatics. Since the late 1960s either side began to acknowledge a certain demand for the exchange of goods and travel of people. Even the Basic Treaty between the two Germanies, agreed upon in 1972, did recognize the actual situation on the ground. Yet only the mutual signing of the Helsinki Accords on Security and Cooperation in Europe in 1975 confirmed a multi-lateral commitment to end the Cold War and to preserve the status quo by peaceful means.

These diplomatic rapprochements, however, did not move the East German authorities to change their denial of freedom of travel to the West for its own citizens. Only pensioners were granted up to four weeks annually in the West upon invitation (including complete funding by their hosts).[7] Generally any move towards expanded and intensified contacts provoked immediate efforts of the GDR-authorities, especially the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) and the Stasi, the colloquial nickname of the Ministry for State Security (MfS), to tighten internal security measures on all levels.[8] This policy-line was never relented and did include killing violence. Thus, border troops of the National People's Army (*Nationale Volksarmee* or NVA) and passport controllers at the few checkpoints (*Passkontrolleinheiten*, staffed by the MfS) were ordered to stop by any means those who intruded into the prohibited areas directly at the border. To inhibit a 'break-through' they were obliged (and entitled) to use their guns.

In turn, from the 1970s GDR-citizens who planned to 'get out' not only looked for opportunities to sneak away by using falsified passports or snatching valid ones (or hiding, for instance, in car trunks). They also tried to make use of the (restricted) opportunities of tourist travel to 'socialist sister countries' like USSR, Hungary and Bulgaria.[9] In turn, at every checkpoint, also towards 'sister

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6   Cf. Bundesministerium für Innerdeutsche Beziehungen (ed.), *Dokumente zur Deutschlandpolitik*, series IV, vol. 7/ pt. I (Frankfurt am Main 1976), 17, 19, see also Adenauer on 13 August, ibid., 11, 37.
7   In the 1980s, however, the regime widened more and more one of the loopholes provided by the Basic Treaty: in 'urgent matters of family' East Germans were granted short trips. Still, spouses or children had to stay behind; see generally Werner (ed.), *Brückenschlag zur deutschen Einheit*.
8   J. Gieseke (ed.), *Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft: Studien zum Herrschaftsalltag in der DDR* (Göttingen 2007).
9   See on the related efforts by church and, primarily, the West German Federal Government to barter and, mostly, to buy inmates into freedom and transfer them to the West (between 1964 and 1989 about 33,700 people), see J.-P. Wölbern, *Der Häftlingsfreikauf aus der DDR 1962/63 – 1989: zwischen Menschenhandel und humanitären Aktionen* (Göttingen 2014); on efforts of fleeing the GDR especially in Berlin: D. Arnold, S.F. Kellerhof, *Die Fluchttunnel von Berlin* (Berlin 2008); P. Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall: East Germany and the Frontiers of Power* (Oxford 2010); on efforts to leave the GDR

countries', an elaborate system of surveillance and inspection was in place. These efforts of 'total control' employed a wide array of gear, from conspicuous road blocks to endless fences, mobile mirrors, and concealed or visible video cameras; at night amplified by huge search lights. Day and night these installations were topped by the guard's small arms and sub-machine guns.

This configuration of material items and people's practices I will pursue in the following sections. The guiding issue is *the interplay of investigative checks* and violence. The checks concerned travellers of any background. Violence, whether threatened or executed, aimed at those who were or appeared to be trespassers.[10] In the following sections selected episodes alternate with outlines of crucial practices and, in particular, the travails of 'improving' the guards' performance. These efforts aimed at making the border checkpoints and, thus, the border as a whole ever more impenetrable.

On 28 May 1983 the Central Information Unit of the Ministry for State Security (*Zentrale Auswertungs- und Informationsgruppe, ZAIG*) sent a 'preliminary note' to those it regularly served: the leading generals of the MfS and the minister, Erich Mielke, himself. Not on this particular list was the dozen of members of the *Politbureau* of the SED; ordinarily they also did receive news about such 'incidents' – at least, when the officer on duty of the Central Information Unit (*ZAIG*) had classified the case as one of 'terror' or 'terrorism'.

The note stated that on the previous day, 27 May, 'around 6.25 p.m. an attempt at violently breaking through the border to Berlin West' at *Bahnhof Friedrichstraße* had ended unsuccessfully.[11] The station had been built – and was still operating – as a railway station. Yet, since the partition of Eastern and Western zones in Berlin the location also served another function: here, in the centre of the city the station became the central East German checkpoint for railway passages: in particular one day visitors to East Berlin from the West, while pensioners were the largest segment of East Germans starting to or returning from visits of family or friends in the West.

Back to the case: According to the note of the *ZAIG* the suspect was a man of 24 years of age who earned his living as a helping hand to truck drivers (*Beifahrer*) in a state-owned moving company (*VEB*); his address was registered for the *Prenzlauer Berg* district of East Berlin. At home the 24-year old had gulped

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legally: R. Hürtgen, *Ausreise per Antrag: Der lange Weg nach drüben. Eine Studie über Herrschaft und Alltag in der DDR-Provinz* (Göttingen 2014).

10   The permanent concern with terrorist attacks was reflected by the permanent remodeling of orders, the prevention of 'terrorist attacks' and respective regular training-runs, specifically designed for each *GÜSt*. As to *GÜST Bhf. Friedrichstraße* see fn. 14. The individual reports of newly recruited passport controllers as recorded in everybody's obligatory notebook ('*Arbeitsbuch*') amply show that (counter-)violence was a main focus in the training of these controllers-to-be, all of them serving at *GÜSt Bhf, Friedrichstraße* in the mid- and late 1980s, for example BStU, MfS – HA VI, Nr. 17827 U. Ritsche, 61–4; Nr. 20202 M. Voigt, 59–70; Nr. 19791 J. Müller, 37–41.

11   The note reported 'the effort of a violent breach of the border to West Berlin' ('*den Versuch eines gewaltsamen Grenzdurchbruchs nach Westberlin*'), BStU, MfS – ZAIG, Nr. 16604, 1–4, 5–12.

down a couple of hard drinks (schnapps was mentioned) before he set out, so the note put it, to hijack an S-Bahn train geared towards *Friedrichstraße*. During the ride he had threatened to apply violence, thus urging the train driver to pursue the ride for another kilometre, until the train would reach West Berlin.

To further his cause, the 24-year old had prepared himself to use his airgun (calibre 4.5 mm) and a rifle scope (as the anonymous author of the investigation team had added). In the afternoon of that very day the suspect had bought 'about 400 airgun pellets of ammunition' at the *Suhler Jagdhütte* at *Alexanderplatz*, in the city centre. From here he went to a nearby pub, the *Alex Treff,* for some more schnapps; afterwards he had taken the lift up to the *Telecafé*, at the top of the TV-tower also located at *Alexanderplatz* (an icon of modernity and a most popular goal for sight-seeing in East Berlin). From high-up the suspect had tried to scrutinize the tracks and the whole scene at S-Bahnhof Friedrichstraße (about one and a half kilometres to the west of the tower).

At any rate, his inspection from high up had confirmed the suspect in his plans. Thus, after leaving the TV-tower he embarked on an S-Bahn-train towards *Marx-Engels-Platz* (nowadays *Hackescher Markt*). There he switched trains and 'upon entering the area of the S-Bahnhof Friedrichstraße' he opened the driver's cabin, took off the bag of his gun and 'threatened at gunpoint the driver of the S-Bahn-train', a 21-year-old woman (the reporting officer had added: married and one child).

The report emphasized that the suspect had threatened to shoot the driver if she would not drive on to West-Berlin territory. In turn, she 'lifted her arms but had already pulled the brakes'. Still, the train passed the next signal; but since it was on 'stop' the automatic emergency brakes brought the train to a halt, however behind the western end of the platform. The report noted that the suspect had threatened the driver he would shoot if she wouldn't start the train again and drive on. Upon her reply that the power was switched off the suspect himself tried all available switches, but without effect.

Meanwhile three armed members of the unit that operated the checkpoints, the 'passport control unit' (PKE) of the MfS, had entered the train. They made their way to the driver's cabin, two of them inside the train, one on the roof of the cars. The suspect, so the note went on, tried to stop them by pointing his gun at them. In turn, the PKE-member on the roof shot twice into the front window of the train; in the next instant his two colleagues arrested the suspect inside the driver's cabin. He was not hurt – and had not used his gun. Nevertheless: the hostage – the driver – was hurt by particles of the window glass hitting her eyes when the guard fired from the roof at the suspect. According to the *ZAIG*-note she was immediately taken to the nearby *Charité*-hospital.

In his concluding remarks the PKE-officer in charge mentioned that the suspect, or as the officer put it: 'the hijacker' (*Geiselnehmer*) had not known that 'this particular S-Bahn track was not connected to the track leading to West-Berlin. If the train had pursued his journey, a buffer would have stopped its ride anyway'. In addition, the officer noted that the suspect had expressed his regrets that his

action had not been successful. For him the reason for this failure was, so the officer reported, 'the fact that he had started his action too late, when the train had already reached the station'. In a follow-up report the *ZAIG* added that travellers who were on the platform of the S-Bahn station but also inhabitants of a housing building across the street had been able to watch the actions of the border guards. Still, the author assured his superiors: 'Half an hour later the S-Bahn operated again in full order'. The report concluded by mentioning a full-scale investigation of the case being already underway. This file, however, does not contain any further information, either on the investigation or on the court trial or the suspect's further fate.

This incident, limited as it was presented by the succinct *ZAIG*-report, demonstrated the state's potential for beating off attacks on the territorial demarcations of the GDR and its sphere of domination.

Generally, the border of the GDR had a *Hinterland* allowing for a border zone of, regularly, 5 km backwards from the borderline. However, in the divided city of Berlin such space was almost nowhere available. Particularly tight was the setting at checkpoint *(GÜSt) Bahnhof Friedrichstraße,* one of the eight designated locations for legal border crossing to and from West Berlin[12] – and the site of the attempted *S-Bahn* hi-jacking presented in the previous section. This *GÜSt* was established on 13 August 1961, the very day of closing the border between East and West Berlin as between the two German states.[13] After a brief interlude the MfS began in 1963 to staff and operate all border checkpoints. Directly in charge was 'Main Department VI' or '*Passkontrolleinheit*' (PKE; unit for checking passports), internally mostly labeled 'line VI'.[14]

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12   After the German–German 'Basic Treaty' (*Grundlagenvertrag*) became effective in 1972 a few were added in Berlin, parallel to opening additional checkpoints at the German–German border and introducing some alleviating changes of control procedures; see BStU, MfS HA - VI, Nr. 5911, Aukunftsdokument über die Grenzübergangsstellen (GÜSt), Berlin 30. Okt. 1982, 10–15, 16 and passim.
13   Until December 1966 the checkpoint was formerly named '*Kontrollpassierpunkt*', thereafter the term was '*Grenzübergangsstelle*', abbreviated as *GÜSt.*
14   On the Ministry cf. BStU, *Anatomie der Staatssicherheit. Geschichte, Struktur, Methoden / MfS-Handbuch* (Berlin 1995–2011), in particular MfS-*Handbuch, Teil III/14:* M. Tantzscher, *Hauptabteilung VI: Grenzkontrollen, Reise- und Touristenverkehr* (Berlin 2009); nothing but the official view from the GDR-heights of command shapes and informs the rather detailed account of a former PKE-officer Hans-Dieter Behrend, '*Guten Tag, Passkontrolle der DDR'. Über die Tätigkeit der Kontroll- und Sicherheitsorgane an der deutsch-deutschen Grenze zwischen 1945 und 1990* (Schkeuditz 2008). The MfS-context, in particular the framing if not self-fashioning of the MfS-employees as pivotal guardians of the state's 'security' is at the centre of J. Gieseke, *Die hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter der Staatssicherheit: Personalstruktur und Lebenswelt 1950 – 1989/90* (Berlin 2000). On the multi-dimensional impact of constructing and guarding borders in the GDR see R. Bessel and R. Jessen (eds), *Die Grenzen der Diktatur: Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR* (Göttingen 1996); T. Lindenberger (ed.), *Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur: Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR* (Cologne 1999); Gieseke (ed.), Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft.

In April of 1974 an internal description of *GÜSt Bhf. Friedrichstraße* read:

> The railway station '*Bahnhof Friedrichstraße*' is the largest and the most complicated border checkpoint in the capital of the GDR. The checkpoint is licensed for all categories of border crossing traffic. For citizens of West Berlin, West Germany and for foreigners *Friedrichstraße* fulfils three functions: border checkpoint, commuter hub and transfer station. At the same time, the railway station is a border checkpoint and a major commuter hub for citizens of the GDR.[15]

The building of *Bahnhof Friedrichstraße* originated from the 1870s (and had been finished in 1881). Due to its inner-city location the shape of the station followed the curves of the railway tracks. Situated in the *Mitte* (centre) district of East Berlin the distance to the border was not great. The tracks extended only 1200 metres while the nearest topographical point of West Berlin, the prominent building of the Reichstag was located at a distance of just 550 metres, as the description maintained.

The 1974-report quoted above went on to mention that (in early 1974) on weekdays about 24,000 people would pass the checkpoint, from GDR-citizens to West Germans or West Berliners to foreign visitors of the GDR. On Sundays and holidays the average figure totalled 54,000 people. Yet, even larger crowds would occasionally use the railway station. These were commuting West Berliners (or West Germans) – they would not cross the border and, therefore, not show up at the checkpoint proper. For instance, this was the case on holidays such as 1 May or when a football (soccer) event was held in West Berlin. Then, the authorities saw 'about 150,000 people' passing through the underground part of the station without actually approaching the border controls. Thus, the main efforts to enhance security focused on that part of the station that remained outside the areas which were designated as territory administered by both the East German military border guards and passport controllers (PKE). Beyond their reach was the platform serving the *S-Bahn* to and from West Berlin and the respective underground *S-Bahn* and subway tracks and stations. This was, in fact, a 'western part inside the GDR' and, as this report went on: 'Here West Berliners and foreigners can stay and move without any control' – as long as they did not try to enter East Berlin or, for that matter, East Germany.

For conclusion, the text of April 1974 pointed out that the *Bahnhof Friedrichstraße* was an 'extraordinarily complicated and confusing object ... containing a lot of basement rooms, staircases and passageways of different

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15 BStU, MfS - HA XXII, Nr. 21067, 57ff, cf., 1–2: Appendix 1 of the draft of the 'Ordinance for the protection of *Bahnhof Friedrichstraße* against heavy provocations and terrorist acts and the cooperation of the respective organs of security protection' (April 1974).

dimensions and length'. Moreover:

> In its entirety, *Bhf. Friedrichstraße* is an object that is prone to disorders and troubles if not *diversion*...Still, dangerous crowds had never emerged due to numerous extra-spaces; the latter would be 'made accessible instantly to safeguard *Bahnhof Friedrichstraße* against heavy provocations and terroristic acts'.[16]

The MfS-unit PKE was in charge of the checkpoint proper. Still, the MfS-personnel ought to 'cooperate' closely (*Zusammenwirken*) with other institutions or – as East German parlance preferred – 'organs' which had to fulfil corroborating functions. The very term imagined, and even more, invoked the physical inter-connectedness of multiple and diverse 'organs' of a single body. This body should represent the East German state (GDR), ruled by its Socialist Unity Party *(SED)*.
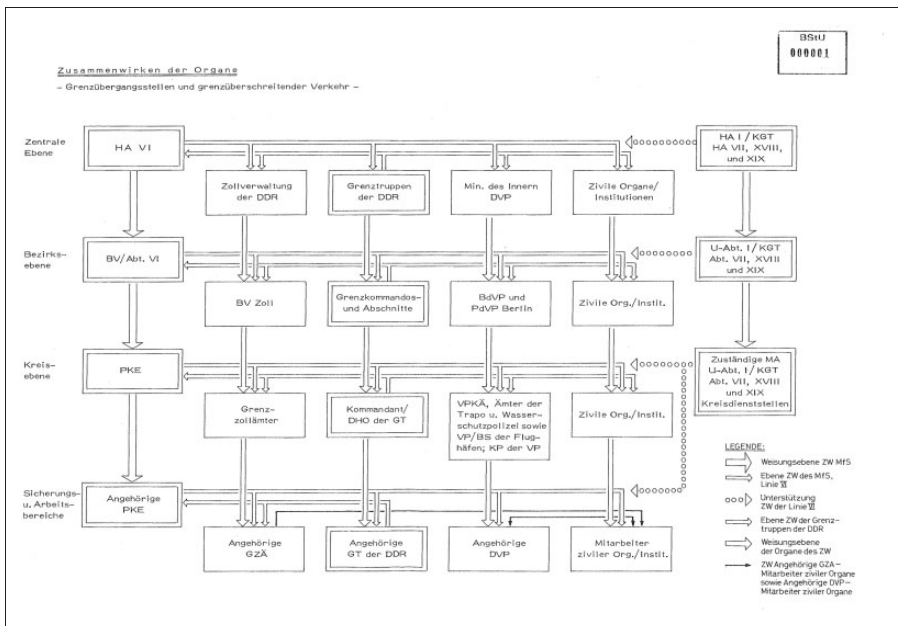

Figure 1. 'Zusammenwirken der Organe, Grenzübergangsstelle und grenzüberschreitender Verkehr' (cooperation of the organs, border checkpoints and border crossing traffic). The vertical shows six institutions that were obliged to cooperate on four (horizontal) levels: central, district, county, precinct - from the left: 1) Main department VI of Ministry for State Security (MfS) and its passport controllers (PKE, Passkontrolleinheiten); 2) customs control; 3) border forces of the army; 4) Ministry of the Interior, police; 5) Non-military or 'civil' organs/institutions (among them the Red Cross); 6) MfS: four other main departments.
Source: BStU, MfS, HA VI, Nr. 4302, 1

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16   Ibid, 62.

Among the cooperating 'organs' were regular police (*Deutsche Volkspolizei*) controlling the surroundings of the checkpoint. The border units of the National People's Army (NVA) participated too; they also had to prevent any trespassing from 'within' into the checkpoint area. The actual identity checks of travellers and visitors were the task of the PKE. Control, however, was likewise needed for any transfer of goods, whether gifts or merchandize, and, in particular, of cash in foreign and domestic currencies. This was the area of the 'blue uniforms' worn by *Zoll* or customs agents.[17] 'The *Zoll*'-personnel sifted through belongings of people wanting to enter or to exit. They decided whether certain amounts of coffee or, more particularly, medicine and, even more, of certain items of printed or recorded material were acceptable or ought to be confiscated (or were withheld until people's return). Finally, since *Bhf. Friedrichstraße* was a railway station, employees of the '*Deutsche Reichsbahn*' ('Imperial German railways', as the name remained until 1990) closed the list of cooperating agencies. Still, the 'Intershop' and 'Genex'-agencies and their salespeople were present; they offered Western goods at lower prices and tax-free to Western travellers. Finally, the 'Red Cross' completed the array of those agencies that ought to 'cooperate closely' in running the checkpoint.

The files of the Stasi reflect the aim of the institution and of many of its employees to exercise 'total control' at the border. Pivotal are the holdings of the offices of the leading generals and – in this case – of line VI. Still, sometimes a memo located elsewhere is even more telling – for instance, a typescript contained in the files of Main Dept. VIII,[18] responsible for detective work and crime investigation. As a vast number of similar internal memos and drafts which preserved in party or state files of the GDR also this one does not show anybody's name for authorship; nor can one retrieve any personal traces like initials for instance.

The context of this particular document points to the late 1970s or early 1980s as the time of origin. On several pages the text deals with the apparent routines of a border crossing. The memo describes 'step by step' how this normality would look like at 'Checkpoint *Bahnhof Friedrichstraße* when crossing to West Berlin'. Obviously, this memo should brief someone on his or her way to a secret mission in West Berlin or West Germany, that was within 'enemy territory' (as the *Stasi*-parlance had it).

The author slipped into the shoes of that presumed traveller: First, upon entering the 'entrance hall' of the checkpoint – the infamous 'palace of tears' (*Tränenpalast*) – s/he would spot 'four counters designated for a pre-review of the travel documents'. Three were open for 'normal travellers' while one was reserved for diplomats and *Dienstreisende* (travellers on official missions; certainly this would not include concealed secret agents as obviously in this case).

Upon passing one of these counters the traveller would walk down some stairs and reach the customs control. These were handled at 'two control-tables. Between

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17   On the Central Agency of Customs Control of the GDR see holdings DL 203 at Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde; my review of pertinent files is underway.
18   BStU, MfS – HA VIII, No. 5458, 10–12.

Figure 2. 'Traktabfertigung in der Passkontrolllinie' (step by step control, line of passport control).
Source: MfS, HA VI, Nr. 4371, 3

Figure 3. No text. – (Customs control, checkpoint for exiting travellers or visitors, here those on official duty or transiting the country ['Dienst- u. Transit-Reisende']).
Source: MfS, BV Berlin, Abt. XIX, Nr. 10072, p. 131, picture 2.

Ausschnitt aus der Fernsehfahndungszentrale
der Grenzübergangsstelle Bahnhof Friedrichstraße
– Fahndungsrealisierer –

BStU-Kopie MfS JHS 20614 Bild 40

Figure 4. 'Ausschnitt aus der Fernsehfahndungszentrale der GÜSt Bahnhof Friedrichstraße, Fahndungsrealisierer' (view into TV-search unit, searcher at work. No date, late 1970s, early 1980s).
Source: BStU, MfS, JHS 20614, picture 40.

those two operates a moving belt with an X-ray screening device.' A customs official would demand that the traveller put their luggage on the moving belt; possibly this person would also ask the traveller to open a suitcase or bag and to present its contents. A '*Leibesvisite*' (body check) might even be demanded. In this case, the traveller would have to enter a specific cabin (separate for males and females as the author also mentioned), and respective female or male custom officials would perform this check. The anonymous author of the memo emphasized the traveller should not directly approach any customs official nor start to offer them his (or her) travel documents. The implicit protocol would demand that 'ordinary walk through as if they would not be concerned at all'. Only the customs officials were supposed to 'do' anything; they were the ones who would approach individual travellers and demand documents or replies to their inquiries.

Further down, the traveller would reach one of the counters, more precisely: small cabins for identity and passport checks. The guideline went on: 'almost never the controlling organ at the counter would put any question to the traveller'. Still it would be 'necessary that the traveller has all the data given in the document ready by heart so that he can respond immediately and without hesitation if being asked'. After leaving the cabin the traveller would enter the rail station section of *Bahnhof Friedrichstraße* and find commuter trains to *Westberlin* but also, on a separate platform, long-distance trains to the BRD, that is, West Germany. At any rate, the traveller should 'enter the checkpoint during a time of day when heavy traffic exists which would make it easier to pass amidst the crowd to the trains at the western part of the *Bahnhof Friedrichstraße*'. This would usually be between 7.30 and 10 in the morning and from 4 to 6 in the afternoon.

Finally, the memo gave some recommendations for behaving in the West: In particular, the traveller should not rush to the next *Intershop*. In fact, the closest *Intershop* after exiting the controls was located on the commuter train platform of *Bahnhof Friedrichstraße,* just outside the checkpoint. The Stasi-paper warned that all of these shops were under permanent surveillance by 'enemy organs'.

Victor Turner's analyses of 'liminality' have found much acclaim beyond social and cultural anthropology. He focused on both, attractions and, perhaps more so, dangers of passing a threshold.[19] Those who seek to pass 'across' scrupulously have to perform specific rites. The primary case in his studies is the passage from childhood to adulthood in several sub-Saharan societies in central Africa. Accordingly, in these contexts it was pivotal for a successful passage to keep to the rites. Only their magical power would provide a safe transgression of a usually rigidly sealed threshold. In fact, building on Arnold van Gennep's seminal 'rites de passage' Turner emphasized particularly those practices that would allow one to manoeuvre 'betwixt and between': that is, between a previous state of things and a new state yet to be achieved. In this view it is the 'in between' that arouses fear and

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19   V. Turner, 'Variations on a Theme of Liminality', in V. Turner, *Blazing the Trail. Way Marks in the Exploration of Symbols* (Tucson, AZ and London 1992), 48–64.

terror; for instance, when a child is abandoning dependency and reaches for the adult's self-reliance and responsibility, s/he is also facing new dangers and, hence, vulnerability. In many cultures ecstatic body practices are crucial for making viable that particular passage. In turn, to stand violence, pain and disgust when passing is the crucial proof for one's eligibility to the new status, beyond the liminal 'in between'.

Does the study of checkpoint operations and experiences show comparable traits in the practices of passing from East to West Germany (and in reverse, from West to East)? Even more, do people in front of counters or in waiting lines participate in or even further 'liminal communitas' (Turner), that is, an activity 'from below' geared towards appropriating the given situation in ways people take as 'their own'? Can one detect individual self-will or '*Eigensinn*'[20] among those who sought passage? And if so, who displayed such stubbornness or self-reliance stronger: people from the West or the East – or both but, perhaps, differently? Moreover, did the ways of encountering the checking procedures among first-timers differ from those of seasoned travellers? Did either of those harbour a sense of 'liminal communitas'? Even more, do the materials show traces of 'communitas' among commanding officers and rank-and-file guards during or outside their work shifts?[21]

Yet does this perspective actually grasp the specifics of passing such checkpoints? Primarily, these passages at the *GÜSt* were never designed nor did they actually happen as a one-way affair. Everyone who passed through was aware of the strict demand to return even if s/he planned or actually tried to ignore it. In other words, such passage never meant a 'final' crossing of a threshold, without return. The latter, however, is fundamental for the rites of passage as discussed by van Gennep and, in turn, by Turner.[22]

In the case of border crossings at this particular German-German border, both norms and practices revolved around the possibility – in fact, the heavily sanctioned pressure – to return in due time. For most Westerners the very limitation to a visit of but a few hours was constitutive. However, also most Easterners had families at home. Most of them expected the traveller to return home at the end of

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20   See A. Lüdtke, *Eigen-Sinn. Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus* (Hamburg 1993), 10–14, 137–40, 375–82; see especially for East Germany: T. Lindenberger (ed.), *Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur: Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR* (Cologne 1999); on people's shifting orientations and their meanderings: A.O. Hirschman, *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action* (Princeton, NJ 1982).

21   Turner's distinction between 'liminal communitas' and 'liminoid communitas' remains rather abstract and seems arbitrary. He places the 'liminoid' outside central societal processes and considers them as 'fragmentary, plural and experimental' if not 'playful' in its appearance: Turner, 'Variations on a Theme of Liminality', 56f.

22   There is a productive proposal by Björn Thomassen to distinguish liminal occurrences beyond the context of ritual as assumed by Turner. Then, liminality should be traced in relationship to (1) the number and individuality of participants, (2) the respective temporal and (3) spatial dimensions, see B. Thomassen, 'The Uses and Meanings of Liminality', *Political Anthropology*, 2, 1 (2009), 5–27, 16–24 (I owe this reference to one of the anonymous comments to the first draft of my article). Still, as much as this proposal covers crucial traits of 'modern' societies, it does omit a pivotal feature of crossing the GDR-border and meeting its PKE: the two-way demand, i.e., the pressure to return.

the designated period of travel. Both the guards who regulated the passage and the travellers who sought passage relied on the assumption of an interrelated two-fold step: across and, in due time, back again.

For the 'organs of state' as for travellers the opposite of the passage Turner discussed was at stake at the checkpoints, whether at *Bahnhof Friedrichstraße* or elsewhere. Yet these intentions of East German authorities overwhelmingly coincided with the interests of the vast majority of travellers and visitors, whether Western or Eastern – to do a temporary passage 'back and forth'. The passage would be limited to a pre-set time and should not produce any change of one's legal denomination or socio-cultural belonging. In turn, the East German authorities time and again felt driven to satisfy demands for due process by treating travellers in a 'swift and correct' manner.

At the same time, however, the logic of sealing the border demanded that these very authorities catch those who, contrary to the official purpose of just temporary passage, did seek a way-out of the German Democratic Republic. Accordingly, the checking procedures implied operations that purposefully would discomfort anyone passing through. In order to force those who aimed at leaving for good to reveal their 'real' face (and, thus, their 'true' intention), the checking procedures ought to unsettle people amidst all gestures of correctness. And to be effective such blend of correctness and threat had to affect all those who passed through.

In other words: 'liminality' as a state of momentary yet fundamental insecurity was an ingrained feature of the checks and the checkpoints. Still, this sort of liminality could mean totally different things for controllers and those who were controlled. Yet a thorough gap also divided East Germans of working age (and thus banned from travelling West) from everyone else, who was entitled for a passage, whether Western or Eastern.

How did the '*organs*' employ and appropriate the rules of their work as issued from the heights of command? How did they (or some of them) assess their own work of being busy to keep every facet of every passage under control, at least in principle?

On the level of political rhetoric and propaganda the task was to guarantee protection against presumed brutal onslaughts by imperialism and fascism. Superiors at the checkpoints, including low-level platoon or group leaders, constantly emphasized when checking and training their subordinates that they were in regular and 'immediate contact with the enemy'.

This line resonated with an internal study (submitted as diploma thesis in 1970) which also spelled out a few intricacies. Every traveller from the West should be rendered as suspicious, in other words, working for the enemy. For instance, if someone tried to peer into an opening door at the checkpoint he or she would just try to 'inspect off-limits spaces'.[23] Or someone who paid closer attention 'to personnel that enters a room': this person was but trying to uncover secrets.

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23   BStU, FHS-Diplomarbeit MfS Nr. 153/70 (14 September 1970), 17, 21.

In turn, this tract stated as primary a demand for the officials on duty to sustain 'ever present alertness'. Only then, the person on duty would detect and uncover the imminent danger of the ever-present 'enemy':

> The appearances of enemy activity are extremely multiple. They comprise both violent and nonviolent actions and include secret or camouflaged ones; they operate with utmost finesse, proceed conspiratively and are, therefore, even more dangerous. Even more, these techniques are employed in various combinations while at the same time well coordinated – thus subversion can operate in every disguise and everywhere.[24]

Still, the author ended his study on an uplifting note: a 'critical atmosphere of identifying people' would certainly exist. Also here he joined the never-ending chorus of public speeches in East Germany demanding that everyone had to 'develop further and lift up systematically' the level of [her or his] performance.

The claim to harm and outwit the 'enemy' at all times and places remained a permanent 'red thread' among the 'checkists' of the MfS. Therefore it must have been an unpleasant surprise when some official in October 1988 received a special report from the (East) Berlin district branch of the MfS. One unofficial informer (*inoffizieller Mitarbeiter* or IM) had reported on the abominably low level of activity of the workers brigades contracted for cleaning the checkpoint *Bhf. Friedrichstraße*. These workers were employed by *VEB GuG;* they ought to do their job in night-shifts. Yet, the informer emphasized, their actual working time was not the scheduled eight hours but merely one hour and a half. Accordingly, almost no cleaning was done: Floor tiles or stairs were never actually touched by a mop. For most of their working time these workers retreated for extended naps. Not to forget – as the reporting Stasi-official, a first lieutenant, painstakingly noted – these workers earned up to 1800 marks (taxes deducted) per month. He did not spell it out but the readers would know: this was around 30 per cent above the wage of a first lieutenant![25]

To ease the task and make operations swifter, since the early 1970s superiors and rank and file alike had sought to construct profiles of 'typical' visitors (or travellers),[26] because inside the security apparatus nobody was foolish enough to assume that everyone who wanted to enter (or to exit) East Berlin was an enemy and would undermine or otherwise attack socialism 'as it really existed'. But how should one distinguish 'regular' travellers from 'hostile elements'? For instance, were those

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24 FHS-Diplomarbeit, 8.
25 BStU, MfS, BV Berlin, Abt. XIX, Nr. 10072, 20. October 1988, 8–11.
26 On categorizing and handling 'visitors' to the GDR and East-Berlin by the PKE see A. Lüdtke, 'Erkennen als Wieder-Erkennen? Anthropometrische Muster der Personenidentifikation. Zur Praxis der Passkontrolleinheiten der DDR', in U. Hanstein, A. Höppner and J. Mangold (eds), *Re-Animationen. Szenen des Auf- und Ablebens in Kunst, Literatur und Geschichtsschreibung* (Vienna/ Cologne/ Weimar 2012), 259–78.

who frequently if not regularly travelled back and forth more dangerous than the occasional visitors? Regular travellers certainly knew the procedures and might have recognized others who also regularly crossed the border. In turn, occasional visitors would perhaps take their lack of experience as an opportunity and collect 'the most recent information on the situation and, even more, transfer that immediately to the enemy' (as an anonymous Stasi-author speculated in another memo).

In the everyday at the checkpoint the controllers should make possible, and, thus, demonstrate '*zügigen Durchlauf*', the swift pass of every traveller and visitor. In demand were procedures that would expedite the circumspect and authoritative handling of the situation with a certain standard of politeness. For control, superiors preferred time measurement of workers' performance, as in any industrial or administrative production line. According to the data compiled in internal reports, it took between four to eight (occasionally nine) minutes to process someone through both customs control and identity check. Accordingly, a report earmarked a 14 minute-check as 'exceptional' and 'regrettable'. These figures were taken for East German travellers, their vast majority being pensioners (as mentioned before, only they were principally entitled to travel to the West, up to four weeks per year).

The different handling of East Germans and West Germans also showed: West Germans (and since 1973 again West Berliners) had to expect a longer 'processing time'. While it was about seven to eight minutes for East Germans, Westerners had to expect to wait about 30–50 per cent longer to get 'through'. The absolute figures looked, however, less annoying: The PKE officials calculated three to four additional minutes. Still, they did not mention in these internal reports the extra time that Western visitors almost ever had to stand in queuing for X minutes (or X hours) before they reached the processing area.[27]

The total number of 'day visitors' from West Berlin, West Germany or other foreign countries varied on workdays between 2000 and 3000, in the mid-1980s. In addition, the PKE counted between 15,000 and 25,000 citizens of the GDR as travellers, primarily people beyond the age of 60 (retirement-age). Over the years, however, the total numbers of people who could enter or exit the GDR at *GÜSt Bhf. Friedrichstraße* increased considerably: from about 2 million in 1962 to 4.3 million in 1972 and to 10.3 million in 1988.[28]

Thus, the dynamics of the quantitative increase ever more intensified the needs to handle that traffic and, at the same time, to keep up if not to improve security standards in daily practice. In this context time measurement was not only an

27   Only when it came to plans to expand and, thus, to rebuild *GÜSt Bahnhof Friedrichstraße* the queues mattered – as an argument for furthering such plans. These queues would distort the image the authorities aspired for so intensely: that *Bahnhof Friedrichstraße* would be a model case for a 'modern border'. Such plans were proposed by PKE-superiors during the 1980s with increasing urgency and submitted by the MfS repeatedly to the bodies of state and party, BStU, MfS – Sekr. Neiber 225, 20–4. On the locality of the *GÜSt* and hindsight recollections of travellers see P. Springer, *Bahnhof der Tränen. Die Grenzübergangsstelle Berlin-Friedrichstraße* (Berlin 2013), on the plans of the PKE for its renovation and expansion 123–7.
28   Report of HA VI, 21 October 1989, on the need for a principal renovation and expansion of *GÜSt Bhf. Friedrichstraße*, BStU, MfS‑Sekretariat Neiber, Nr. 225, 21.

internal method of control for the performance of PKE-officials. Rather, these were politically sensitive numbers since they reflected the waiting time of visitors of 'Berlin, capital of the GDR', and they included their grudge when forced to wait 'longer'.

For Western observers, not the least journalists from the yellow press, such numbers were a convenient tool for attacking the political 'other' in the East. For instance, the West Berlin papers periodically asked their readers: wasn't it bloody cruel to let elderly ladies stand for 60 minutes or more before checking them? Of course, such notes and comments were carefully monitored and clipped by some clerk of 'line VI'. Hence it is no surprise that every single bit of such news triggered an immediate and obviously thorough internal investigation by and within 'line VI'. While superiors of the PKE finally reported all cases to be pure 'fabrications', they knew better. In fact, the longstanding chief of line VI, Major General Fiedler, had advocated the rebuilding and extension of *GÜSt Bhf. Friedrichstraße* since the early 1970s.[29]

Back to the checkpoint routine: it was the passport control that ought to guarantee that the person who presented a specific passport was actually the very individual documented in that passport. To achieve 'watertight' checks, specific training should ensure both the official's sensitivity and swiftness on the job. Constant yet irregular internal checks showed that even well-trained and experienced 'comrades' might relent on their attentiveness during their stint, at least for a split-second: they had to scrutinize each of the hundreds if not thousands of faces they had to identify while on shift. In fact, the guards had to identify the person by comparing him or her, that is, his or her face, with the respective passport picture in less than one minute.

The minimum standard of proper work required that each controller would check everyone who sought passage for '3 to 5 invariable [physical] attributes'.[30] Having underlined this point in a memo of July 1977 the chief of PKE at *GÜSt Bhf. Friedrichstraße* continued: Only adequate practice of all PKE-members would make possible:

> reliable and swift processing of cross-border traffic. The target of our daily checkist or nosework is to prevent channeling-out of people (*Schleusen*) or other activities of the enemy. Since channeling-out is based primarily on the principle of similarity [of bodily appearance] painstaking identity checks focused on the relatively invariable attributes (*relativ unveränderliche Merkmale*) of a person are crucial.[31]

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29   To underline his point, line VI passed a photo-documentation to Lieutenant General Neiber, one of the deputies of MfS-Minister Mielke, showing the totally cramped and overcrowded *GÜSt* on two days, a holiday 'day of penance' 16 November and the following 17 November 1988, BStU, MfS – Sekr. Neiber Nr. 140, 55–69.
30   'Measures for enhancing the quality of identity checks in the domain of *PKE Bahnhof Friedrichstraße*', 14 July 1977, BStU, MfS – HA VI, Nr.10413, 5–13.
31   Ibid., 5.

Classified manuals and handouts for internal training reiterated time and again the concrete features of these 'relatively invariable attributes'. The edition of May 1977, for instance, discussed and visualized three categories of such attributes: one is 'based on the bone structure (profile of head, form of forehead and chin)', the second focuses on cartilages (details of ear or nose), and the third scrutinizes the eyes (including eyelids and eyebrows). The authors also reminded readers that each attribute they considered had to be 'visible'. Moreover, they provided precise guidelines on how to treat travellers and in which sequence to do what: to ask the traveller to turn his head, to ask to remove her hat or scarf (or both) and to lay bare one ear.[32]

In the fall of 1988 a new tone signalled a mix of alarm and urgency. The deputy chief of line VI, Vogel, alerted the chiefs of the local PKEs to a rise of channellings-out that was small in number but relatively large in proportion. In 1977 neither an attempt nor a successful action had been reported for Berlin. Yet for the current year (1988) Vogel referred to 10 attempts, of which six had been successful. The deputy chief saw the main reason for the increase of successful escapes in a stark discrepancy between orders and training on the one hand and the actual practices of checking on the other. In Vogel's view, controllers relied too much on 'unhealthy routine, were reckless and superficial' when ignoring pre-set procedures. Secondly, he criticized the aim to accomplish outstanding results beyond one's own capacity; thirdly, he turned to 'objective and subjective factors of distraction, especially by travellers'.[33]

Interestingly, Vogel discussed at some length only the third issue and gave two concrete examples from Berlin (one at GÜSt *Oberbaumbrücke*). Either one showed travellers who obviously tried to distract the respective controller. In one case a traveller had asked the controller a question while the latter compared the person's passport-photo with their appearance. In the second case two adults with an infant overstepped the rule to pass the checking counter strictly one-by-one. Rather, they passed the checking facility together. The message was clear enough: keep distance and strictly follow the orders on the stages of the checking-procedure.

To be sure, the orders just mentioned were a repetition of a repetition, thus also testifying to the conveyor belt matrix of the work process at the checkpoints. These orders also regularly demanded that 'at the slightest doubt during the process of identification' that particular traveller was to be taken out of the processing chain. Three or four specialists had to check again focusing on three if not five 'invariable attributes of that individual'.

At the same time, these and similar orders reminded the controllers (or guards) not to give in and become sloppy but to strive for an 'ever higher level of attentiveness' at their task of visual identity checks. Thus, it could not come as a surprise

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32 'Material for exercise: identification of people *(Übungsmaterial Personenidentifikation)*', May 1977, BStU, MfS-HA VI, Nr. 10382, 67–76, especially 71–3.
33 'Information on problems of identity checks in cross-border traffic', 17 November 1988, BStU, MfS - HA VI, Nr. 10384, 2–5, especially 3–4.

that both rules and actual work of checking and controlling invited efforts of improving efficiency as well as quality of that particular work. Therefore, since the 1960s 'scientific work organization' (WAO) had become a regular topic in orders and reports.[34] Still, whatever approaches superiors developed and applied: regular short-term repetition of these orders testifies to a rather constant discrepancy between rules and the guards' actual ways of 'doing' their work of control.

In October 1976 the routine meeting of the '*erweiterte Leitung*' (steering group) of line VI was devoted to assess work performance at identity checks across the board at all checkpoints. Twelve majors and colonels focused specifically on the middle level officers of the respective units (mostly platoon leaders) and, in turn, on the actual practices of identity checks at the checkpoints. The steering group agreed that middle level officers were crucial for properly organizing work and motivating the controllers to focus on their main task. Because, as lieutenant-colonel Ziegenhorn reported: the controllers too often would waste that very time they should use for identity checks and control of passports. Instead they would check second order issues. He took an example of a road checkpoint where controllers busied themselves with scrutinizing license plates or counting the occupants of cars.

Another participant of this meeting, lieutenant-colonel Redel, pointed out that many of these middle-level superiors would not really know their subordinates. What he found lacking was the comprehensive information of the platoon leaders about their rank and file. Similarly, as Redel added, in many of the 'collectives there were no efforts to criticize each other', or as he put it: 'no disputes'.[35] Colonel Wilke pursued the issue. He stressed how ambitious and complex a task this was: to check papers and faces, to observe the behaviour of people inside and outside of cars or on train platforms, and, still, to avoid any mistake. In turn, he added, too often superiors would just 'pass the stick down' to their subordinates without bothering themselves with the task's feasibility.

Two of the group (Döhler and Tresselt) took a slightly different point of view. They emphasized that controllers overwhelmingly did a good if not excellent job. Still, deficits like those mentioned above have been appearing for 10 years in reports or in such meetings.[36]

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34   In the autumn of 1978 (20 November) the chief of HA VI, Major General Fiedler, ordered all PKE to apply 'scientific organization of work' ('*Wissenschaftliche Arbeitsorganisation*', *WAO*) because favourable conditions of work 'would facilitate a continual and swift control and clearance of travellers' while 'keeping the psychic and physical strain of the controllers as low as possible' *('Günstige [Arbeits-]Bedingungen' würden die 'Gestaltung einer kontinuierlichen und schnellen Kontrolle der Abfertigung' erleichtern, dabei die 'psychische und physische Belastung der Paßkontrolleure so gering wie möglich halten')*, MfS-HA VI, Nr. 10413, 40–41. However, an order of November 1988 (17 November) by the then deputy chief of HA VI, Major General Vogel, reflected the given limits: 'Even minute deviances from the prescribed procedures have to be fought relentlessly' *('auch die kleinsten Abweichungen von den festgelegten Handlungsabläufen [sind] konsequent zu bekämpfen')*, BStU, MfS-HA VI, Nr. 10384, 2–5.
35   BStU, MfS - HA VI, Nr. 12291, 91.
36   Ibid., 92.

Tresselt emphasized: the controllers felt 'pressured' from both the increase of traffic and the demands from superiors. Still, in his view the existing practices of training controllers were all right. Yet, parallel to the demands exacted by travellers it was largely superiors themselves who would exercise constant pressure. Therefore he suggested a stronger focus on the 'actual process of work' (*das Leben im Prozess der Arbeit*) as the main site and time of further qualification. Special training courses would not solve any of these issues. Thus, superiors should shift their focus to the actual performances on the job and during competitions (*Wettbewerbe*). The flipside of this statement might have read: It would be futile to issue yet another guideline; needed were serious efforts to enhance the sense of responsibility among the comrades who actually took on the job of checking people and documents. The next speaker, however, watered down that line. Lieutenant-colonel Dr. Heyer reminded the group that the number of travellers was permanently increasing as were, in turn, the 'overarching demands for security'.[37]

The flipsides of these constant demands to keep alertness at a permanent high surfaced only occasionally – they may, however, have flourished under camouflage. For example, a protocol from the 'centre of operations' (*Operative Leitzentrale; OLZ*) in August 1988 criticized the fact that controllers and other officials on duty played computer games. Obviously, by way of response, another protocol confirmed that computer games remained prohibited during morning and afternoon shifts but not during night shifts; still, during the latter, those games should be finished at 2 in the morning. And a few months later, in March 1989, one of the items at a meeting of senior officers of the OLZ was the explicit confirmation that during working time reading of illustrated news (or books) or, for that matter, solving puzzles was strictly prohibited for all personnel on duty.[38]

The few oral recollections of controllers strike a different note. They emphasize how satisfied they felt on their job, allowing them a sense of independence and pride in their work. The brief moments of checking and the – even shorter – instant of deciding whether to let a traveller pass or to defer (or forbid) the passage. In particular in these moments the controller 'did' the border whether s/he granted or interdicted entrance or exit. However, if the controller made a 'mistake' that could be traced back to her or him, an inquiry and most likely disciplinary and party punishments would follow (rarely, however, was anyone fired). These possibilities reflected if not bolstered the special status assigned to and claimed by PKE-members. After all, did they not directly face 'the enemy', day in, day out? And did they not bear a special responsibility for the security not only of the GDR but of the Socialist Bloc in general?

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37 Ibid., 93.
38 BStU, MfS - HA VI, Nr. 9355, 67 (3 August 1988); 82 (14 March 1989).

Travellers and visitors may have had rather different views of passing (or being rejected). A seasoned controller and longstanding instructor responded to the question:

> Was there harassment? Yes, there was. In the PKE there were certain individuals...who left people waiting. This happened not often. Strangely, these PKE-folks never did this to top people, they didn't have the guts. The ordinary Turk, however, who just wanted to visit his girlfriend they left waiting and waiting and waiting.[39]

Eight months after the Berlin Wall had come down on 9 November 1989 the checkpoint *Bhf. Friedrichstraße* was shut down for good. A few weeks prior to the closing date, 30 June 1990, two West German filmmakers interviewed instructors and controllers of the *Friedrichstraße*-PKE.[40]

One instructor told the filmmakers that he and his colleagues had taught the PKE-trainees to follow strictly the 'technological procedure'. He also pointed to the anatomical basis of the criteria applied in the checking process: 'All that is based on the bones counts, as do noses or ears – the details count. For instance, your gristly ear won't ever change. This is also why the officials demand: "Let me see your ear" (*Machen Sie das Ohr frei!*)'. And as to the official's performance at these checks the interviewee underlined that he and most of his fellow-instructors were convinced that 'women are the very best in controlling...They are at least 50 per cent better than men'. He added that the instructors had tried to encourage trainees to act not solely in linear pursuit of instructions and orders. Rather, they should employ their own senses and judgment and act 'autonomously'. In particular he claimed to have encouraged the trainees to be innovative and develop (and also lobby for) technical or procedural improvements. Such activity 'supports people's feeling that their labour is important and provides quality'.

Some weeks prior to this the filmmakers had interviewed regular PKE-personnel. One of them had told the interviewers:

> Yes, although the job was extremely strenuous I liked it a lot. Otherwise I would not have stayed on. I enjoyed working with people.
> *Question*: What was this work with people?
> *Response*: The regular contact to people who were from all parts of the world, to communicate with them – and even if it is just controlling them: still, you are in touch with other people.

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39   Oral history interview, A. Lüdtke and A. *Interview-collection Alf Lüdtke*, 'Interview GÜSt (9)', 5 July 2010, 12; the interviewee, born in 1940, joined MfS and passport control in 1964; from 1972 he served in the Berlin area, first at GÜSt Mahlow at the southern border of Berlin and from 1973 at GÜSt Friedrich-/Zimmerstr. the eastern counter-part to the western Checkpoint Charlie in the centre of Berlin.
40   U. Herdin and L. Grote, *Berlin. Bahnhof Friedrichstraße 1990*, Film, Berlin SO 36 (1990); broadcast on ZDF-TV in fall of 1990; unpublished transcript by the authors.

> *Question*: But when controlling you just see faces. What is that for work?
> *Response*: Well, you can compare it with working at a conveyor belt. That is mentally exhausting, for sure, because you just compare individual with picture, individual with picture – as at a conveyor belt.

In conclusion, this article explores practices and perceptions of East German passport controllers. By turning to different scenes at one of the few checkpoints between East and West Berlin, *Bahnhof Friedrichstraße*, various (inter)actions of and among controllers come into focus. Ambiguities emerge. For instance, how to combine the demand for correct, if not polite, treatment of travellers with the even more principal rule to strictly follow the control regime and check everyone rigorously to intercept any effort of illegal crossing?

In this view, the efforts of these East German 'organs' to keep up tight checks and even intensify control competed with surging numbers of people who were entitled to seek passage. Yet, 'doing border' never became just an issue of managing growing numbers with limited means and a relatively small staff. Foremost, the checkpoints were a conspicuous part and parcel of that kind of domination the 'first socialist state on German soil' proclaimed and executed. Thus, a few afterthoughts are in place, not the least to stimulate further research and debate:

- To what extent did the controllers who operated the checkpoints perform and behave differently from clerks in offices (or labourers on industrial shop floors, for that matter)? Or from another angle: did the swift turnover of ever more travellers – that is: 'mass production' – become the underlying, yet driving principle?
- Did the constant efforts of superiors to keep the guards and controllers on high alert testify to the latter's stubborn, perhaps countervailing efforts to undercut the never ending barrage of regulations and stick to 'their' way? Moreover, does the constant stream of reminders issued 'from above' reflect specific practices of guards to blend '*Eigensinn*' and their breed of *Wertarbeit* or 'German quality work'?
- The files of the PKE were part and parcel of an archival documentation that emphasized administrative procedures and deskwork. In this case, masses of typescripts, diagrams and tables revolved around the practices of checking, filtering and processing people (and goods) at and across a border that separated states if not 'two worlds'. Thus, the documents lead onto the micro-level of domination. Thereby they reveal a threefold 'inner face' of these border checks: for one, to claim a well-governed modern statehood; secondly, to demonstrate the state's sovereignty and, thus, unlimited reach; thirdly, to invoke a countervailing potential most guards had at their disposal: to bend, circumvent or outflank one or the other of the orders from and expectations of 'above', at least occasionally.
- In particular, it was the ritualistic ingredients of the checks that visibly (if not palpably) alluded to this 'inner face'. Numerous recollections of people from

either side who prior to 1989 crossed this border confirm that tiny ritualistic moments fed into that fundamental uncertainty they felt at the checkpoint: Will this in-betweenness swallow me up, in the end? What is to come next?[41] For instance, can one be held up at an official's discretion, at least beyond any reasonable justification? Yet also the unexpected happened: that a controller 'blinked' and cut an identity check short.

- Is the impression valid that most of the checking procedures and practices remained rather unchanged between 1961 and 1989? In other words: did the PKE-personnel encounter time as passing or as frozen? What was the temporality at the border, especially for the MfS-employees at the location, the controllers and their local superiors? They also had to deal with dynamics that steadily increased from the early 1970s: the exponential increase of travellers. Many of the latter preferred *GStÜ Bhf. Friedrichstraße* for crossing the border. The consequence was straightforward: such rising numbers directly enhanced the workload for everyone on the shop-floor of the checkpoint. How did the employees handle such intensified stress, especially the concomitant risk of mistakes and ensuing sanctions?
- Physical violence remained ever present in the work of the guards. In fact, their capability and entitlement to hurt – if not to kill – people on the spot was not merely embodied in their postures and gestures. They conspicuously displayed smaller and larger firearms at all times. And a case like the high-jacking incident of May 1983 (see above) testifies, once again, that it could be a short-circuit between displaying and using one's firearms.
- Among other aims, historical reconstructions seek to trace the making and un-making of domination. Yet, in this effort researchers also have to employ the viewpoints, terms and rhetoric of those who designed and executed this very domination. The respective files are 'already here',[42] especially in the case of the GDR. Surely, after the GDR's demise the power of definition as administered by the old regime was frozen. Still, the presence of files is suggestive, especially when they are produced by an all-intrusive secret police. To what extent, then, have academic experts retired Ranke's saying: Only that exists which is in the files?
- Researchers rely on files and other remnants (or traces). Yet isn't their driving effort illusionary – to 'get closer' by close reading or participant observation? In fact, the very effort to get close may foreclose any chance for an alternate perspective on issues that are blurred or just not visible when coming too close. One of the tales collected by the Brothers Grimm may help: The fast running hare is always losing to the slow hedgehog, however the hare tries to beat his small competitor. In this case a look from afar (if not from above) would have shown

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41 On East German travellers, primarily pensioners, see Springer, *Bahnhof der Tränen,* 101–9; the East German literary author Rolf Schneider recalls the series of through checks at his crossing of the border at Berlin's GÜSt Invalidenstraße in the morning of 9 November 1989, a few hours before the Wall came down: R. Schneider, *Frühling im Herbst. Notizen vom Untergang der DDR* (Göttingen 1991), 16–17; a comprehensive study of accounts of foreign or West German visitors of the GDR is still missing.
42 See Gieseke (ed.), *Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft*.

the hedgehog's setup: the two identical hedgehogs sitting at start and end of the race-lane, in their clever scheme to outwit the hare. The hedgehogs may not run fast; still, at least in the Grimms' tale both are each time 'already here'.

Acknowledgements

Biographical Note

Alf Lüdtke is retired from the Max-Planck-Institute for History, Göttingen, and the University of Erfurt, where he is now *Honorarprofessor*. He held visiting professorships at universities in the USA (Princeton University, University of Chicago, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), Israel and South Korea. He researches domination and violence; transformations of industrial work; the emergence of 'modern' forms of the visual; and the history of the everyday. Recent publications include: *Unsettling History: Archiving and Narrating in Historiography* (co-editor); *Istorija povsednevnosti v Germanii*; *Kolonialgeschichten* (co-editor); and *Polizei, Gewalt und Staat im 20. Jahrhundert* (co-editor).