

Can a Town Divided Against Itself Stand?

Abraham Lincoln, what does *he* know? A house divided against itself *can* stand, and will do so for decades, no sweat. Berlin, Nicosia, Jerusalem — heck, even Kansas City: all are cities that have been split in two by borders. All are still around. But if being split down the middle doesn't mean the end of the world, it ain't fun either. A house divided is a house of pain, with degrees of inconvenience varying from administrative annoyance to frequent lethality.

Nothing in human geography is so sensitive, so interconnected as the urban fabric. Cities are places of exchange, where people come to trade skills and goods [1]. Which is why borders are usually willed elsewhere: down the middle of rivers, following the tops of mountain ranges, straight through deserts. Generally anywhere bereft of human presence.

The urban border, cutting through neighborhoods and city blocks, closing off streets, metro lines and other traffic arteries, is a glaring exception to this Boundary Rule Number One [2].

Then again, it is so widespread — from Laredo/Nuevo Laredo to Gorizia/Nova Gorica [3] that another general principle must be at work. Back to the human in “human geography”: where people meet is also where they argue; where they work is also where they fight. Where they get together is also where they feel the greatest need to stay apart. If, as Sartre said, “hell is other people,” then cities perhaps are a bit like the eighth and ninth circle of Dante’s *Inferno*, but with better evening entertainment options.

The ideal city is a cosmopolis, a magnet thriving on raw talent and naked ambition, disinterested by the baggage people bring; its counterpart in reality, however, is more like a centrifuge, separating urbanites into neighborhoods according to their race, class, religion and ethnicity.

Take the city grid of Nicosia [4], the divided capital of Cyprus. The map shows the city



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center girdled by a perfectly circular and symmetric set of city walls. These three-mile-long fortifications, built by the Venetians in the 16th century, were designed to defend the city against the outside world.

Superimposed on that circular defense system is the Green Line, currently dividing the city (and the entire island) in two. The city walls, with their 11 imposing bastions, may be more impressive than the makeshift border that runs along do-it-yourself barricades and the facades of empty houses, but they have lost all meaning and function — except for those bits where the Green Line and the city walls actually coincide.



The Green Line has cracked the Venetian fortification like a fragile egg. The city, conceived to be one and indivisible, is now an odd couple, divided into two bickering halves. What follows such a separation is a geopolitical version of schizophrenia, repeated in other divided cities elsewhere. Each half of the city pretends to be the “real” one, the entire city in itself. The other half’s legitimacy, even its existence, must be diminished, if not outright denied.

That sounds like the synopsis of a science fiction novel, and it is: in “The City & the City,” China Miéville sets a noir thriller in the pixilated, intertwined cities of Ul Qoma and Beszel, each of which denies the very existence of the other. (Urban doppelgängers are a theme in Miéville’s work: in his earlier novel “Un Lun Dun,” he provides names for the phantom twins of real-life cities, including Parisn’t, No York, Lost Angeles and Sans Francisco.)

Clearly, divided cities provide a rich seam of material for writers of a certain type of fiction [5]. But reality doesn’t always need the embellishment of literature. Consider the Baltic twin town of Valka/Valga [6]. Today a small town split by the Estonian-Latvian border, in the 15th century it was the seat of the Livonian Confederation [7], a long-forgotten state comprising most of present-day Latvia and Estonia. When the latter two states used the confusion of the Russian Revolution to proclaim their independence, they had to decide what to do with this ethnically mixed town that sat right on their border. Instead of fighting over it, they simply split it in two [8], though confusion reigned over

how, exactly, it should be administered.

When the Soviets took over the Baltics again at the start of World War II, the border became an internal irrelevance, but it resurfaced as an international issue — and drain on the local economy — after Baltic independence in 1991. Fortunately, in 2007 Estonia and Latvia, now both members of the European Union, acceded to the Schengen Zone [9], which essentially eliminated the border in all but name and geography. The two halves of the formerly unified town are now officially twinned and something of a tourist draw; it's almost like one of those tearful reunions of long-lost relatives you see on daytime TV.

If Valka/Valga is daytime TV, Berlin's recent history is positively operatic. At the Potsdam Conference in 1945, Germany as a whole and Berlin in particular were divided into four occupation zones to be administered by the Allied powers (the Soviet Union, France, Britain and the United States). Because the cold war so quickly succeeded the hot one that had been World War II, a comprehensive peace settlement was never reached, and temporary occupation zones congealed into satellite states.

Impromptu borderlines hardened into an Iron Curtain and, in 1961, the Berlin Wall. The absurdity of militarizing a peacetime border through a major European metropolis is illustrated by what happened to West Berlin's half-dozen exclaves, small plots of land that lay just outside the city limits. Mere administrative anomalies before the partition of Berlin, these exclaves became potential international trouble spots. The Third World War might well have started at Steinstücken [10].

This little hamlet once was a mere afterthought of Berlin stuck in rural Babelsberg, a suburb of Berlin's next-door city Potsdam. After 1948, it became a western thorn in the side of the East Germans. After 1961, its few dozen inhabitants were surrounded by their own private version of the Berlin Wall. The United States offered military (and moral) support by establishing a helicopter-supplied outpost. Eventually, an exchange of territory provided the exclave with a "land link" to Berlin's "mainland." War was avoided, of course, and Steinstücken and the other exclaves survived. Indeed, almost a quarter century after the fall of the Berlin Wall, these peculiar arrangements are still visible on a map of Berlin's city borders.

When the wall fell in 1989, the former German chancellor Willy Brandt captured the mood, and framed the task ahead, by quoting: "Now grows together what belongs

together” [11]. Visiting Berlin these days, the borderologist would be hard pressed to find traces of the wall except where it has been preserved. Berlin has indeed grown together.

It’ll still be a while before that happens in Nicosia: the animosity on both sides is live enough to still be lethal. Seven years after the opening of the Berlin Wall, two Greek Cypriots died a few days apart when both sides confronted each other on separate occasions inside the buffer zone.

Same story in Mitrovica, a Kosovan town divided by the river Ibar into a Serbian north and an Albanian south. Troops from NATO maintain the peace, but occasional flare-ups of violence are a reminder of the often deceptive nature of peace and quiet in this part of the world. The city’s division replicates the broader Kosovan conflict in miniature, and in reverse. Kosovo, a majority-Albanian province of Serbia, tore itself away from Serbian control in 1999, with a little help from NATO. The Serbian-majority northern tip of Kosovo, where Mitrovica is situated, then subtracted itself from Kosovo-Albanian control and refused to recognize Kosovo’s subsequent independence. That stance is in turn not recognized by Kosovo, and by the international community that supports Kosovo’s independence.



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Complicated? We’re only just getting to Jerusalem. It’ll be a while before that city is Berlinified, even though it has been un-divided since Israeli troops conquered the eastern half of the city (plus the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) in the 1967 War. The Holy City had been divided since Israel’s war of independence, when its eastern part (including the Old City) came under Jordanian control. Until 1967, the Green Line [12] meant barbed wire, concrete fencing and a border crossing at the Mandelbaum Gate — providing this Middle-Eastern city with a cold-war-like setting more associated with the Europe of that time [13].



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But in Jerusalem, unification has not equaled pacification. The mainly Arab east of the city has been annexed to the mainly Jewish rest of Jerusalem. Palestinians resist Israeli takeovers of houses in the east, and insist their part of the city should be the eventual capital of an independent Palestine. But how can this be achieved without an extension of Israel's security wall right through the city? In a place where there's no middle ground, where you're either from one side or the other, it's hard to see how a case can be made that both parts of the city belong together, and should grow together. Even Willy Brandt would agree.

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[1] And generally live in expensive, shoebox-sized apartments. But let's not get into that.

[2] "National borders should be placed as thoughtfully, conveniently and inconspicuously as electrical wiring." Just think of the mess if the work needs to be redone.

[3] On the American-Mexican and Italian-Slovenian borders, respectively.

[4] The Cyprus border was discussed earlier in this series. See "[Frozen in Time](#)," Dec. 19, 2011.

[5] China Miéville's work is often classed under science fiction, but he prefers the term "weird fiction."

[6] Valka is the Latvian (western) part of the city, Valga the Estonian (eastern) part. Formerly the town was also known under its German name, Walk.

[7] The Livonian language, related to Finnish and Estonian, is effectively extinct. In 2010, one to five native speakers were reported (and 30 who spoke it as a second language). A later name for one of the many manifestations of Livonia as a state was Terra Mariana, in English: Maryland.

[8] After adjudication by the British commissioner for the Baltics, Sir Stephen Tallents. Few people know that the Brits even had had a hand in Baltic border-drawing. Tallents is more remembered for his subsequent P.R. job at the Empire Marketing Board.

[9] See also the previous post in this series: [“The World’s Most Exclusive Condominium,”](#) Jan. 23, 2012.

[10] For more on the division of Berlin, and its implication for the mapping of the city by the East German authorities, see [“Then We Take Berlin: When East Ate West”](#) ([Strange Maps No. 513](#)). For more on the Steinstücken exclave, see [“Exclaves of West Berlin \(4\): Steinstücken and Wüste Mark”](#) ([Strange Maps No. 151](#)), which also references earlier posts on other such exclaves.

[11] Always cited as: *“Jetzt wächst zusammen, was zusammengehört.”* On the night of Nov. 10, 1989 itself, Brandt used a slightly different phrasing, even more clearly lifted from the early 20th-century erotic bestseller *“The Life Story of a Viennese Whore, As Told By Herself,”* purportedly written by Josephine Mutzenbacher. Experts now believe that to have been a pseudonym for the Austrian writer Felix Salten (1869-1945), most famous as the author of *“Bambi,”* the book that gave us the movie.

[12] Like the line in Cyprus, and a few others. This line was so called after the ink used to demarcate Jordanian positions on an armistice map (the Israeli positions were marked in red). In 2004, the Belgian-Mexican artist Francis Alÿs walked the former armistice border, marking it with a bucket of dripping green paint. The audiovisual recording of this peripatetic artwork is called *“The Green Line (Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic).”*

[13] Like in divided Berlin, Jerusalem had an exclave situation going on: from 1948 to 1967, Mount Scopus (the site of Hebrew University and a Jewish hospital) was Israeli territory on the Jordanian side of the armistice line.