

Iron Curtain in Aš: Socialist Heritage and Its Destiny after 1990

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Abstract

This paper presents collaborative interdisciplinary research on the mixed natural and cultural heritage of the former Iron Curtain in the Czech town of Aš. Sociocultural anthropology, history, and geobotanical and environmental studies were the main disciplines that were equally involved. The former Iron Curtain is one of Europe's longest linear landscape features and an exceptional symbol of European history. The researched area covers the Czech-Bavarian and Czech-Saxonian borders, mainly the Aš spur. The research investigates the impacts of the long-term existing isolated strip of land of the Iron Curtain both on natural and sociocultural levels. It further examines the post-socialist transformation of the given area and the elements and processes of redefining local memory and identity through handling the local Iron Curtain heritage.

Keywords

Iron Curtain heritage; socialist heritage; post-socialist transformation; redefining local memory and identity

Introduction

The Iron Curtain represents a mix of cultural and natural heritage and is an exceptional symbol of European history. In 2003, different regional initiatives across all of Europe came together to form one shared formal initiative called the “European Green Belt” under the patronage of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature in order to protect this unique “post-socialist” heritage. Although the origins of the initiative are mostly connected to the conservation of the biological corridor along the former Iron Curtain, it also seeks to ensure sustainable development in terms of the socioeconomic prosperity of the local communities.

Approximately 7,000 kilometers in length, the former Iron Curtain is one of the longest linear landscape features in Europe. Although the once compact structure is now fragmented, its main course is still traceable in many areas.

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Even in a metropolis like Berlin, its line is still obvious and accompanied by significant landscape features such as abandoned railways, brownfields, etc.¹ At present, the structure of the former Iron Curtain bears some unique features. While the western part mainly consists of a long-term cultivated cultural landscape similar to the rest of the country and is almost untraceable, the eastern part contains a strip of very distinct and variable character. This eastern strip once contained numerous military installations including a wide variety of buildings, bunkers, watchtowers, fenced zones, wastelands, and vehicle barriers. Almost all forms of agricultural cultivation declined in this part, with the exception of a forest plantation meant to deteriorate the terrain and cover the remains of abandoned and purposely destroyed settlements, which could otherwise provide shelter during illegal border crossings.

For the purpose of this article, only the part of the Iron Curtain near the Czech town of Aš will be analyzed. This area covers the Czech-Bavarian and Czech-Saxonian borders extending from the village of Vojtanov in the east to the village of Pomezí nad Ohří in the west. Coincidentally, the Iron Curtain was also established here at the Czechoslovakia-East Germany border to thwart the frequent escapes of East Germans to Bavaria in West Germany.

Three main disciplines were equally involved throughout the course of this research: history, sociocultural anthropology, and geobotanical and environmental studies. This interdisciplinary research approach made it possible to analyze the studied phenomena on several levels and in several aspects at once. The research team consisted of a historian, sociocultural anthropologist, and an environmentalist. Each had their own methodology and processes for collecting and analyzing data, which was then consolidated in the data synthesis phase. Repeated fieldwork research took place between the years 2017 and 2021. It included continuous data collection consisting both of participatory and non-participatory observations, area mapping, desk researching, archive researching, gathering local promotional materials such as tourist brochures, and website content and analyzing the narratives concerning local heritage; a series of both prearranged and random interviews was also conducted with various target groups. Furthermore, these efforts were also in tandem with the team's active involvement in an applied research project² concerning this area of inquiry.

1 However, the Berlin part is a distant exclave of the Iron Curtain and its construction is not interconnected with the major structure.

2 The project of the Czech Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs focused on local development via applied interdisciplinary research and cooperation with local communities in the West Bohemia regions throughout the years 2017 and 2021 was called "Místa zblízka: místní rozvoj vedený mezioborovou spoluprací a učící se komunitou" (Places close up: local development led by interdisciplinary collaboration and an inquiring community).

The historical research involved looking into available primary sources in local and regional archives and museums and examining secondary sources such as local history and topographical literature in order to understand the historical processes and phenomena that took place in the area. The sociocultural-anthropological and ethnographic approach consisted of participatory and non-participatory observations of significant places and events as well as interviews with community stakeholders and locals. An emphasis was placed on finding out and understanding how the local community perceives the heritage of the Iron Curtain in an urban area and its surroundings and how the space has been used. The geobotanical and environmental research mapped the dynamics of the local natural environment as well as the environmental parameters of the territory that functioned as indicators of the state. The research focused on data relating to significant natural processes that influenced the form and structure of local human settlement and vice versa. As a whole, the data revealed human interactions with the landscape and set a basic management framework and level of protection for the natural environment and its heritage.

The research looked into the social practices of individuals, groups, and local communities and institutions, referring to both the cultural and natural local heritage, namely the heritage of the former Iron Curtain. This also involved examining the current state of the Iron Curtain's heritage in the Aš region. Last but not least, the research aimed to understand the contexts that brought about the social practices related to the Iron Curtain's heritage in the Aš region as well as the region's condition.

The Iron Curtain strip in the Aš region

The Iron Curtain strip in the region of Aš represents a unique opportunity for comparing the contrasting patterns of rapid transformations in postwar land use in three different areas: the former Czechoslovakia-East Germany border, the Czech-West Germany border, and the Aš spur itself. In the first case, the changes were the most moderate. Although it was forbidden to cross the border, the landscape and urban structure remained preserved, barring some exceptions (Otov - Ottersgrün; Horní Paseky - Oberreuth). In the second case, the former cultural landscape was literally wiped out by the military on the Czech side of the border. Conversely, the Bavarian part of the border has retained its agricultural and cultural character to this day, and therefore the border still creates a very stark transition between the two different landscapes. The Aš spur is internally split into two regions: the northern part with preserved land connectivity and urban structure, and the

southern region, consisting primarily of abandoned villages, former military roads, abandoned paths, and a forest with deserted pond cascades, some of which have already almost disappeared under thick vegetation.

The latter of the landscapes was quite typical for the entire Czech-Bavarian borderland. The width of the abandoned strip (site of the former Iron Curtain's extensive installations) varied from hundreds of meters to several kilometers, depending on the terrain and proximity to larger settlement units. However, this zone had implications extending beyond the area with its long-distance roads, migration corridors for animals, vegetation patterns, etc., stretching deep into the Czech inland. In terms of avifauna, it is believed that the biodiversity was positively influenced up to 50 kilometers inland. On the other hand, the diversity of the traditional cultural landscape swiftly declined on the Czech side of the border following the war. This period was marked by the rampant destruction of natural hydrological schemes caused by widespread drainage systems, massive forestation of predominantly spruce plantations, and the disappearance of manmade habitats and cultural landscapes, such as mown meadows, orchards, and arable fields, mainly due to spontaneous succession. Despite the above, the Aš borderland is now home to some unique natural values such as the freshwater pearl mussel (*Margaritifera margaritifera*), a species that is almost extinct in Central Europe. The freshwater pearl mussel is bound to clear, natural streams in extensive cultural landscapes and to a high abundance of valuable wet meadows and peat bogs with oceanic biotic elements. It is not only the landscape but also the structure of the Iron Curtain itself that has retained some unique natural values. The area, which had been inaccessible for decades, suddenly became suitable for animal species that were otherwise disturbed by human activity. In well-watered areas, the upper soil levels, impacted by heavy military machinery, often hosted rich amphibian communities and competitively weak plant species, once typical for field margins.

One of the long-overlooked features associated with the Iron Curtain was the rich birdlife undisturbed by agricultural activity. This was first noted by West German ornithologists as early as the late 1970s. In addition, biologists noticed extensive biodiversity along the border areas of various countries both from the Western and Eastern Bloc. The 1980s saw a growing appreciation of these areas by scientists across the Western and Eastern Bloc, which led to their collaboration. Immediately after the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1991 (though in reality it effectively ceased to exist in 1989–1990 due to the communists' abandonment of one-party rule coupled with democratization in Eastern European countries), these areas of the “Green



Fig. 1 The tri-border area near the village of Hranice: borderland of the German federal states of Saxony (former East Germany) and Bavaria (former West Germany) and the Czech Republic (former Czechoslovakia) with a map of natural habitats. Note that most of them are crowded in a narrow strip along the border. The former East Germany–West Germany border was not included in the mapping due to methodological differences, but it also contains high natural values. Map from the archive of the cross-border cooperation program Czech Republic—Free State of Bavaria project no. 293 “Historické využití území a jeho význam pro budoucí ochranu významných druhů podél bavorsko-české hranice / Historische Landnutzung und ihre Bedeutung für den zukünftigen Schutz bedeutender Arten entlang der bayerisch-tschechischen Grenze” (Historical use of the land and its importance for the future protection of important species along the Bavarian–Czech border).

Belt” were officially recognized as one of the most important bio-corridors in Europe as well as valuable relics of the Cold War. Initially, it was the strip along the former West and East Germany border, which received attention in this regard, hence the German roots of the Green Belt conservation initiative.³

3 The initiative was officially established by the Green Belt Resolution of Hof in December 1989, one month after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The document was defined and signed by more than 300 environmentalists from the former German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany. See: Riecken, U., Ullrich, K., “Implementation of the Green Belt – From Paper to Practice. 20 Years of Experience in Germany.” In *2nd Baltic Green Belt Forum - Towards Sustainable Development of the Baltic Sea Coast* edited by Gulbinskas, S., Gasiunaite, Z., Blazauskas, N. and Sterr. (Klaipeda: Klaipeda University Publishing, 2010.).

In 2003, this was transformed into a European-wide project and initiative called the European Green Belt. Despite being recognized as culturally and naturally valuable, the area in the Aš spur was not included in the initiative. The same applies for the entire area of the former Czech and West Germany Iron Curtain border. Even though it is prone to loss of connectivity and biodiversity, there are only a few natural reserves and one landscape park spanning the entire length, and none of the conservation goals are focused on the conservation of the entire landscape structure of the former Iron Curtain on the Czech side.

The historical background of Aš

The Aš region is historically the western-most part of the Czech lands. Today, it has a population of 20,000 inhabitants. Although a geographical periphery, it has always been a wealthy and economically developed region. The rich ore-mining works in the Ore Mountains were located nearby, and the region functioned as a trade center and a crossroad between Bavaria and Saxony. During the industrialization of the 19th century, the Aš region became one of the biggest textile producers of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire and subsequently of Czechoslovakia, retaining its position until the 1990s. In 1924, there were about 60 separate factories and about 300 knitting, weaving, and dyeing workshops in the Aš district, which had a dense population of 25,000 in the town and the dozens of villages and rural settlements in the environs. The regional history was very turbulent in terms of the social situation in the 20th century. The vast majority of the region's population were Germans, mainly of higher and upper-middle social standing (factory owners, businessmen, and tradesmen) while the Czech minority, about 5% in the inter-war period, belonged to the lower social strata (wage laborers, seasonal farm workers) or were civil servants (teachers, post and police officers, railway workers). The Great Depression of the 1930s hit the region hard, stoking ethnic clashes. Already a few weeks before the Munich Agreement, at the end of the summer of 1938, the Sudetendeutsches Freikorps⁴ took over the region. Czech locals were quickly expelled, the region was resettled by mostly pauperized people from the inner parts of Germany, and many industrial companies switched to military production.

By the time of the liberation of Aš in April 1945, part of its German population had already emigrated to West Germany, and others were forcibly expelled in

⁴ Paramilitary Nazi organization that terrorized the Czech borderlands.

1946.⁵ Only a minority of the original German inhabitants were allowed to stay, referring to the dozens of antifascist farming families and a few thousand workers indispensable to the industry and their families.⁶ A resettlement of the region by Czechs and Slovaks from the inner regions of Czechoslovakia began immediately. Although the ratio of original inhabitants permitted to stay was slightly higher than in other borderland regions, the population of the area changed drastically in a very short time and dropped by half.

The resettlement, followed by the economic revitalization of the town's industry, was not the biggest issue of life in Aš's after the war. With many villages and small settlements completely deserted, the borderland countryside became a dangerous place full of smugglers, thieves, and armed criminals trespassing the borders. In order to deter them, a protected zone heavily patrolled by armed paramilitary guards, policemen, and army troops was established around the town soon after the war. Strict controls and restrictions began to affect everyday life for the newcomers. When the Cold War emerged and the Aš region became a part of the Iron Curtain zone, the locals were already used to living under a special regime. In April 1950, the whole region was declared a Czechoslovak borderland zone and divided into two zones according to their proximity to the borderline and thus subjected to different levels of vigilance. The official proclamation was to prevent hostile agents from entering Czechoslovakia, though its true purpose was quite the opposite. The borderline itself and the closest zone approximately 2 kilometers wide was called the forbidden zone, which was ordered to be completely depopulated. During 1951, all citizens of this zone were expelled inland, and all the buildings and constructions were completely demolished—about 25 villages, settlements, solitary farms, and mills. The rest of the region was under the “borderland zone regime,” which meant that everyday life was restricted and controlled even more than before. In particular, non-inhabitants needed special permission to visit the region, people could not walk off the roads beyond the urban areas, and farmers and hunters needed to be accompanied by armed guards on the field or hunting grounds. The cultural landscape of

5 During the last months of the war, about 10,000 migrants from East Prussia were settled in the town on their way to the West, making the town “overcrowded” with about 35,000 inhabitants. The total number of expelled Germans from the Aš region exceeded 50,000. The town itself lost about one half of its inhabitants (from 22,930 inhabitants in 1930 down to 11,378 inhabitants in 1947). See: *Kronika města Aše* (Aš, 1946).; Krátký, J. *Obce Ašska v proměnách času*. (Aš: městský úřad, 2005); “Historický lexikon obcí České republiky 1869 - 2011”. Český statistický úřad (2015), <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/historicky-lexikon-obci-1869-az-2015>.

6 According to various sources, the number of the non-expelled German inhabitants is estimated at approximately 3,500–5,000 inhabitants at the end of 1946. See: *Kronika města Aše*; “Historický lexikon obcí České republiky 1869 - 2011”.

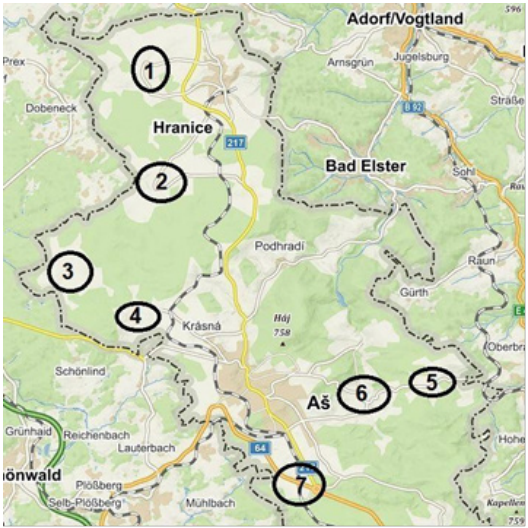


Fig. 3 Locations of abandoned or vastly depopulated borderland villages in the Aš region, selected according to Fig. 2. (1 – Trojmezí, 2 – Pastviny, 3 – Újezd, 4 – Štítary, 5 – Horní Paseky, 6 – Verněřov, 7 – Nový Žďár).

the Aš region started being massively and deliberately transformed into a heavily militarized landscape of the Iron Curtain.

	1930	1947	1950	1961
Trojmezí	845	151	123	92
Pastviny	921	165	247	158
Újezd	190	20	-	-
Štítary	211	43	21	-
Horní Paseky	277	62	30	48
Verněřov	1151	336	225	186
Nový Žďár	380	166	90	43

Fig. 2 Population decrease of selected borderland villages in the Aš region from 1930 to 1961. Source: Historický lexikon obcí České republiky 1869–2011; Kronika města Aše 1946, 25; Soupis obyvatelstva v letech 1946 a 1947.

The Iron Curtain infrastructure in Aš

In the Aš region, the Iron Curtain was built along the borderline. It was a complex system of physical obstacles, killing mechanisms, hidden traps, automatized weapons, and guard posts connected to military bases. All these constructions and mechanisms were located directly within the borderline zone and scattered across the terrain, thus affecting the visual as well as natural characteristics of the local landscape. Barbed-wire fencing was the main and most prominent installation of the Iron Curtain. It consisted of three rows of barbed-wire steel fence stretched across wooden panels.⁷ The wires were buzzing with lethal power, and countless small transformer stations were built and connected to the local electricity supply. Ironically, as many locals still remember, this undoubtedly contributed to the electrification of the urban area of Aš. Furthermore, the security trenches were mined. The landmines were activated either by pressure (when stepped on) or electrically (when the wires moved). However, due to the high ratio of failures, which often lead to spontaneous explosions killing the guards, the landmine fields were soon cleared and dismantled.⁸

The Aš zone was the oldest and yet the most modern and progressive part of the Iron Curtain in Czechoslovakia. All the innovations, sophisticated mechanisms, and electronic technologies for monitoring and signaling were first applied in this zone. In the mid-1960s, the conceptualization of the Iron Curtain in Czechoslovakia changed somewhat.⁹ The original electric fence, which precisely demarcated the state's borderline, was moved about 2 kilometers deeper inland to the very beginning of the forbidden zone. A partial reason for this was the international pressure against the use of killing wires. However, it also shortened the length of the Iron Curtain, making it

7 At the beginning of 1952, a row of barbed wire fences was erected. This "wall" was later reinforced during the summer and fall of 1952 with the addition of a second and third 2-2.5 meter-high row of barbed-wire fence, while the central wall 2.9 meters in height was electrified. The electrification of the wall was performed despite existing regulations and the former Czechoslovak public endangerment law ("Zákon o obecném ohrožení"). The system of electric equipment for border protection ("Elektrické zařízení k ochraně hranic" / "EZOH") was supported with a voltage of 2-6 kV and could instantly kill an intruder. The system was supplied with electricity from transformer stations typically located near the patrol bases.

8 They were in use in the years 1952-1955. See: Pulec, M., *Organizace a činnost ozbrojených pohraničních složek. Seznamy osob usmrcených na státních hranicích 1945-1989* (Praha: Úřad dokumentace a vyšetřování zločinů komunismu, 2006), 94-95).

9 The new border control system was now explicitly designed so that it did not have to deter incoming intruders from the West from crossing the border line but rather served to stop and catch those escaping from Czechoslovakia. The new border line, with two rows of barbed-wire fence and dug trenches, was equipped with electronic sensors signaling any interference with the Iron Curtain to the patrol bases' control rooms. See: Pulec, *Organizace a činnost ozbrojených pohraničních složek. Seznamy osob usmrcených na státních hranicích 1945-1989*, 93.

easier to guard and also gave guards the opportunity to stop (either catch or shoot) runaways still within state lines. The significant impact of these changes was that the recultivated, cleared, patrolled, and militarized forbidden zone moved closer toward the town.

Many of the electric transformer stations, which supplied power to the electric border system, have remained abandoned relics of the impassable countryside to this day. The construction of the Iron Curtain entirely changed the structure of the roads in the countryside of the borderland zone. The need for the fast transfer of motorized troops led to forest clearings; construction of new roads; and the closure, dissolution, and physical blockade of the traditional roads that historically connected the Aš region with its borderline. The out-of-use country roads and forest passages were barricaded with steel, reinforced concrete, and wire obstacles of various types and materials depending on the terrain. While the wooden, wire, and steel constructions were almost entirely removed shortly after the fall of the Iron Curtain, some of the concrete roadblocks are still present in parts of the countryside in the former borderland zone of Aš, providing evidence of the directions and general network of roads before the Iron Curtain era.

The fenced forbidden zone was later replaced by the “boundary zone.” Many constructions were built in the boundary zone, including a total of six border guard bases; a huge military compound with a central courtyard; and surrounding buildings for accommodation and dining, storage units, garages, communications offices and headquarters, infirmaries etc. Each of the guard bases was equipped with more than 200 men. Officially, the border guards were not really military troops but rather members of a special police force. Thanks to their station, they received premium equipment, better weapons, and other advantages. Such service was considered more prestigious but also more difficult than the regular army.

The long-standing military infrastructure and architecture that surrounded the whole area of the Aš spur bore certain implications for social life and social practices in the region. It established some form of a “gated community” in the sense that, to a certain degree, it was a remote community. The imposing presence of the military structure created a space where everything was continuously being surveyed and controlled. Such conditions evoke Michel Foucault’s idea of the panopticon, a symbol of social control that extends into everyday life. According to Léopold Lambert in his *Weaponized Architecture*, gated communities favor and choose security over their own privacy (2012, 29). In the case of Aš, the choice the inhabitants made is seen as a decision in

favor of acquiring property.¹⁰ In order to attract new residents and repopulate the borderland regions after the expulsion of the majority German population following the war, the state offered up the properties of the expropriated Germans for free. The allure of free property was evidently strong enough to overshadow the restrictive living conditions in the military zone.

As for the military architecture, Lambert proposes a hypothesis of a “space of precaution” that exists in reaction to potential threats to society (both obvious and constructed). As such, these spaces temporarily apply punitive schemes toward people who did not even overstep the law as a precaution (2012, 20). Lambert identifies one type of military infrastructure that expresses itself in the built environment as a precautionary state of emergency and which transforms domesticity into detention and control (2012, 22). This holds true for the Aš area during the time of the Iron Curtain. Specifically, this precautionary state was manifested in both the tangible forms and intangible practices present in the area, such as the barbed-wire fences, toll gates, physical presence of border guards, train station controls, and special permissions for visiting the town, as well as the specific subculture and social practices of the border guards. Relics of this distinct environment constitute one part of the surviving local heritage, which is perceived rather as an “unwanted heritage.” In the case of material examples, these are by their very nature more visible and palpable. Intangible examples, on the other hand, may not be so obvious at first glance.

Post-socialist transformation and redefining local memory and identity

Societal values generally tend to manifest themselves physically and political values are no exception. Therefore, the built environment can be perceived as a “physical materialization of the values, ideas and power relations of the given era.”¹¹ In the Aš region, remnants of the Iron Curtain are examples of structures that continue to retain their specific meaning, regardless of the regime change, and tend to serve as a type of heritage—a heritage, whether identified in its tangible or intangible form, that is above all understood as an “unwanted” heritage; or at least, this is how it has been perceived by the local community as of late. Not so long ago, artifacts and mementos of socialism were generally disliked or ignored; such relics were certainly not accepted as a

10 Owning property often reflects the desire for a home, which relates to the need of security. From this perspective, the local community also favored security over privacy, though rather a security linked to ensuring their livelihood than protecting their very lives.

11 Ira, J., Janáč, J., “Materializing Identities in Socialist and Post-Socialist Cities,” *Materializing Identities in Socialist and Post-Socialist Cities*, Ira, J., Janáč, J. eds. (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2017), 14.

“good” and “cherished” heritage, nor as something to be proudly included in the collective memory or honored as special places of memory.

After 1989, many towns, cities, and regions in the Czech Republic were faced with the task of reconfiguring their urban and regional memory and heritage in light of the major sociopolitical changes. The country’s capitals took up the strategy of presenting themselves as national centers, while other towns and cities exhibited the common pattern of turning to the medieval past as a model (Czaplicka 2009 cited in Janáč and Ira 2017, 15). Generally speaking, the model for reinventing representations of places from the 1990s onward included the search for something unique, non-conflictive, catchy, pleasing, unconventional, etc. Regarding the town of Aš and its microregion, it appears it must have been quite difficult to develop a new identity and memory for the place. The popular and non-conflictive medieval times were not up for consideration, as there was no material evidence of such history (also thanks to a devastating fire in 1814). Another unique feature of this area was the fact that after the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648) in Europe, the Aš region remained the only place in the former Czech lands where Protestantism was not only allowed but also served as the exclusive religion. However, this fact did not attract much attention, as it also lacked physical evidence. Moreover, in a country with one of the highest numbers of proclaimed atheists in the world, such recourse is understandable.¹² Nevertheless, the town did create a place of memory at the site of a former Protestant church, one of the greatest monuments in the town, that was completely destroyed by a fire in 1960.

What also established the town’s special character was its development into an industrial textile hub by the end of the 18th century, which continued to thrive until World War II and has survived to this day in the form of several operating textile factories and a textile museum. In fact, the invention of the Austrian Empire’s first weaving machine in 1834 and mechanical weaving loom in 1864 took place right in the town of Aš.¹³ However, the town’s urban memory was not restructured around this part of its history, despite the fact that old and new textile factory buildings are a dominant part of the town’s built environment. Several factors can be taken into consideration here. The Aš district was part of the Sudetenland (this is not a formal term in Czech but rather a generally accepted designation for the border areas of today’s Czech Republic, which were predominantly settled by Germans from the Middle

12 Such weak support for religion can be viewed as the legacy of the Czech nationalism of the 19th and 20th century that saw Catholicism as an Austrian import; Protestantism never managed to fill the gap. The country’s socialist regime (1948–1989) then suppressed the revival of any religion.

13 Pekař, F, *Cheb a okolí*. (Praha: Olympia, 1984).

Ages until 1947), meaning that most of the local textile manufacturers were Germans. The wealth generated by the local textile manufacturers legitimized Konrad Henlein's propaganda, thereby strengthening the position of his Sudeten German Party. As a result, power was seized in the district in May 1938, whereby it was de facto annexed to the German Empire before the Munich Agreement was signed in September 1938. This development prompted Czech inhabitants to leave the town. After the end of World War II, the German population was displaced not only from the Aš district, but also from former Czechoslovakia as a whole. Despite efforts for immediate resettlement comprising predominantly Czech inhabitants, the population of Aš fell by more than half and many factories were forced to shut down. The town's settlement structure changed entirely, and newcomers had no place memory linked to the town of Aš. Thus, they had to go through the process of forming their new local identity. The heritage of the textile industry was perceived as German heritage, meaning a hostile and therefore neglected one. This perspective was further promoted by socialist propaganda until 1989.

Another theoretical option for creating a new urban identity after the turn of the regime in 1989 was the memory and heritage of the Iron Curtain, as it was and still is clearly present in both the material environment of the town's surroundings and intangibly, in the form of regular meetups by the former border guards of the Iron Curtain. The village of Mödlareuth in Germany, approximately 50 kilometers away, serves as a successful example of a place of memory, established in the form of a museum dedicated to the heritage of the Iron Curtain.¹⁴ Yet, nothing of the kind was ever built on the Czech side in the Aš region. There are only a few examples on record from the early brainstorming stages—one by the municipality of Krásná and the Local Action Group MAS 21 proposing an educational trail with some museum installations following the line of the former Iron Curtain, and an initiative of the local branch of the Czech borderland society ("Klub českého pohraničí, z.s.) to create a permanent museum exhibition in one of the remaining fortifications.¹⁵

14 The Deutsch-Deutschen Museum was established in 1990 in the German village of Mödlareuth, located on the former borders of East and West Germany. It was called "Little Berlin", as the walls of the Iron Curtain split the village into two parts. Over the years, the museum has developed into a complex heritage institution and a major point of interest attracting a large number of visitors.

15 The society of the Czech borderland (called Klub českého pohraničí), that claims to protect state borders based on the law of socialist Czechoslovakia from 1951, has sparked controversy for appearing to support the former communist regime; no state institution or grant projects have thus expressed their cooperation or allocation of funds for this project in any official capacity.



Fig. 4 A display of border signs in the Doubrava village. The concrete roadblock in front of them is most probably a former Iron Curtain military obstacle. The border sign from the Iron Curtain period is the one just behind the black helmet saying “Beware. Forbidden zone. Do not enter.” (Photo from author’s archive).

This shows that material structures may retain their specific ideological content, even despite a change in regime; they thus act as carriers of memory¹⁶ of the former era, indicating that there is no space for redefining these relics in the near future. Although the infrastructure of the Iron Curtain represents a site of memory, it is a memory that does not want to be recalled by the majority of the local community and thus does not serve as a heritage site. Pierre Nora calls these places “lieux de mémoire” (places of memory) and sees them as both material objects and immaterial practices that have deliberately (or unintentionally) become symbolic representations of the collective memory of a given community.¹⁷ In this light, depending on which community’s perspective is employed, a different type of collective memory may emerge and may consequently produce various opinions on whether a site is or is not a heritage site. Referring to the case of Aš, there are communities both local (e.g., the former border guards) and outsiders (e.g., experts and academics)

16 Ira and Janáč (*Materializing Identities in Socialist and Post-Socialist Cities*, 15) talk about urban structures retaining ideological content, something which this study also considers to be valid for any man-made material structures either in urban or landscape settings in general.

17 Nora, P., “Mezi pamětí a historií. Problematika míst”, *Cefres* 13 (1998).



Fig. 5 The former border guard observation tower on the Stráž hill above the borderland village of Horní Paseky. The hill remains deforested. The second picture shows part of the village featuring the renovated former military buildings, which are now used as housing (Photos from author's archive).



Fig. 6 Building of a former patrol base in Újezd from the outside and inside. They are empty, dilapidated, and freely accessible. (Photo from author's archive).

that see the Iron Curtain as a heritage, though they are neither the majority nor stakeholders, thus lacking in the power to “make it happen.”

The Iron Curtain Heritage in Aš now

The Iron Curtain in Aš, and in Czechoslovakia as a whole, ceased to exist exactly one month after the regime change beginning 17th of November 1989. The barbed-wire fences were cut, and the poles, barriers, and watchtowers were quickly taken down, though much has remained to this day in the form of ruins. Regarding Aš, it is now truer than ever that “devastated by time or willful destruction, incomplete as they are (ruins), they represent a combination of man-made forms and of organic nature” (Zucker 1961, 119). Tim Edensor describes ruination as a process whereby built objects “are between rejection and disposal. Because they have been devalued but not yet removed or erased, there are no sanctions on how they might be used or interpreted.” (Edensor 2015, 53). With regard to the perception of the Iron Curtain as an unwanted socialist heritage, which is still prevalent among influential local interest groups, the potential to reimagine, rebrand, and reinvent the ruins of the Iron Curtain is seen as low. Nevertheless, ruins are historical records, and they create an intensely evocative atmosphere, which gives them a vitality of their own and a certain *genius loci*. This applies to all of the different types of ruins, including the remains of the Iron Curtain. This can be attested to by the popularity of the Iron Curtain’s ruins, sites, memorials, and museums in Berlin as well as the nearby village of Mödlareuth amongst a wide range of demographics. The question that remains is to what extent this can be perceived in Aš. Bearing in mind the above, certain assumptions present themselves. A brief overview of the current condition of the Iron Curtain’s artifacts and their presentation and accessibility will further elucidate the situation.

In the village of Doubrava, located directly on the border with Germany (former border with East Germany), there is an informal display of miscellaneous border signs from different time periods on a wall by the road. Among this collection, there is also one border sign from the Iron Curtain period.

Moving further from Doubrava, about 7 km south along the former border with East Germany, there is another borderland village called Horní Paseky. The village was heavily depopulated and demolished as it was located in the immediate vicinity of the forbidden zone (see Fig. 2). The border guard built its facilities here, including a border guard observation tower on the Stráž hill above the village. After 1968, the Soviet army also moved here and

built blocks of flats for its families and a barracks for the Soviet Army Radio Company. They did not leave the area until 1990. For the next six years, the village was abandoned until the Aš municipality repaired the houses and made them available for use. Today, the observation tower is situated between five wind turbines in the middle of a field surrounded by an electric fence for restricted access. There is no path leading to the tower, nor signage identifying the former tower or any kind of information regarding the history of the Iron Curtain and its obvious remnants in the countryside. The construction is in poor condition and has been weathered by strong winds. The booth is lacking full paneling, and the floor and the sheets have been scattered.

Many other buildings of the former military border patrol, such as bases and barracks scattered around the area, have been left unkempt, left to deteriorate as ruins without a purpose.

When it comes to local museums as places of memory, there are no artifacts connected to the Iron Curtain heritage detailed above. The main museum of the area, the City Museum of Aš (Muzeum Aš. Národopisné a textilní muzeum), presents minimal information related to the former Iron Curtain and the town's role in it in its permanent exhibitions. The exhibit panel on transport infrastructure makes only one mention of the period of the Iron Curtain in the story of the "Freedom Train."¹⁸ In addition, the project for a newly opened park (June 2022) in the center of the town symptomatically named The Park of History (Park Historie), which purportedly focuses on the town's history, has not yet made any reference to the region's Iron Curtain past.¹⁹ What is more, the Iron Curtain's legacy is absent from the town's official website in the section on local heritage and sightseeing tips and is similarly missing from the town's promotional brochures and pamphlets.

The only explicit physical link to the Iron Curtain heritage in a public space appears to be an educational cycling trail. The Green Belt, which runs along the former Iron Curtain, has been widely used for cycling along the entire Iron Curtain. This initiative was also embraced on the Czech side of the

18 The Freedom Train is a popular name for the Czechoslovak State Railways Train No. 3717 from Cheb to Aš, which on 11 September 1951 quickly passed through the end station of Aš to the former West German town of Selb. It was one of the most famous mass escapes to West Germany. Most of the 110 passengers crossed the border without being aware of what was happening and 77 of them then returned to Czechoslovakia (mostly high school students from the nearby town of Cheb and patients from the spa town of Františkovy Lázně). This successful action organized by several opponents of the regime stoked an international response and prompted the communist authorities to start construction on an impenetrable Iron Curtain. As a consequence, the railway tracks at many unused border crossings were torn out to prevent similar incidents.

19 The audiovisual educational trail that has also been proposed as part of the park project is still in progress. However, it seems there are no expressed intentions to include the town's perceptible Iron Curtain history.

border, where a nonprofit organization marked a cycling route in 2001 along the former railway signals of the Iron Curtain (named Bohemian Greenways) as part of a long-distance cycling route called the Iron Curtain Greenway.²⁰

Conclusion

In conclusion, though it is unwelcomed and perceived more as a burden than heritage, relics of the Iron Curtain do remain in the physical memoryscape of the Aš area. While an Iron Curtain heritage might not be attractive for locals, it may prove attractive for other target groups, as evidenced, for example, by the nearby Iron Curtain Museum in Mödlareuth and urbex fans drawn in by the genius loci of abandoned architecture. It is surprising that when trying to build its image and find a uniqueness of its own, even after over 30 years of major sociopolitical changes, this town has avoided shedding a spotlight on its Iron Curtain heritage—a unique feature that undoubtedly sets the area apart from the rest of the country and is a proven tourist magnet. At the same time, it must be added that when it comes to the natural aspects of the Iron Curtain heritage, the attitudes of the locals vary. There have been several projects and initiatives focused on the conservation and promotion of the local natural heritage.²¹ One of the likely reasons is the long-term international recognition of Green Belt values, the bio-corridor along the whole length of the former Iron Curtain, as well as long-standing efforts to protect and promote the bio-corridor, which have resulted in many international projects connecting the natural heritage of the Iron Curtain to the territories of 24 states. To a noticeable extent, the up-down approach (from formal international initiatives via national natural conservation institutions) has also given rise to natural heritage activities in the local area. Another plausible reason behind these initiatives is that natural heritage evokes a different type of response. It seems to be a matter of fact that nature and natural objects are always perceived

20 This became part of the later Iron Curtain Trail (marked as the bicycle route EuroVelo13) which spans over 10,000 km and goes through 20 countries and aims to cover the whole length of the former Iron Curtain in Europe.

21 For about 17 years, efforts by the Nature Conservation Agency of the Czech Republic and the regional non-profit organization Ametyst as well as local municipalities targeting the conservation of the freshwater pearl mussel have been present in the Aš area. A recent Czech-German cross-border cooperation project, led by universities and national nature conservation institutions involving local stakeholders, focuses on the general protection of animal and plant species along the Bohemian-Bavarian part of the Green Belt including the Aš area (Project no. 293, "Historické využití území a jeho význam pro budoucí ochranu významných druhů podél bavorsko-české hranice."). The Nature Conservation Agency of the Czech Republic is currently planning a massive revitalization of the waterways in the Aš area. Furthermore, the municipality of Krásná has received generous funding for the protection of the surrounding biologically valuable landscape, a remnant of the Iron Curtain.

positively, which does not apply to the human artifacts that comprise cultural heritage, as they can conjure very different memories and interpretations.

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Interviews

Member of the former border guard of the Iron Curtain association, August 2018

Director of the Deutsch-Deutsches Museum in Mödlareuth (displaying the Iron Curtain between former East and West Germany), September 2018

Guide in the Deutsch-Deutsches Museum in Mödlareuth (displaying the Iron Curtain between former East and West Germany), September 2018

Member of the BUND Naturschutz in Bayern team (The German Green Belt Project), October 2018

Mayor of the town of Aš, June 2017

Vice-mayor of the town of Aš, May 2017

Mayor of the town of Krásná, April 2017

Representatives of the Local Action Group “MAS 21,” April 2017

Guide at the textile museum “Národopisné a textilní muzeum Aš” in Aš, September 2019

Director of the Aš information center, September 2017

Director of Haus des Osten German museum in München, September 2018

Local social and cultural NGO representatives, 2017-2019

Unstructured interviews with random members of the local community during various event participations and visits to heritage sites 2017–2019