

Revealing the Heritage of Post-Military Landscapes

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Abstract

In Germany, the fall of the Iron Curtain led to the extensive withdrawal of allied troops stationed there, as well as the reduction in number of the German armed forces. This process was accompanied by the repurposing of formerly restricted military terrain in both urban contexts and the countryside. Post-military landscapes are full of traces of former usage and comprise a heritage that ranges from their earlier civilian history to their militarisation, from past to recent conflicts. This paper focuses on the remembered and forgotten narratives of these fascinating sites and relates them to current management policies for the development of former military sites. Two examples show how landscape design can contribute to preserving or even revealing the forgotten political dimensions of post-military landscapes.

Keywords

landscape, post-military landscapes, Germany

Background

Preparing for the wars of the 20th century gave rise to the enormous militarisation of Germany's towns and countryside. This was accompanied by the transformation of civilian landscapes into restricted military zones. During the subsequent Cold War, the allied and Russian forces and the two German armies used and sometimes even enlarged these establishments. Surrounded by civilian life, military landscapes have been used to prepare for war all over the world. However, following the political upheavals towards the end of 1989 and in early 1990 and the subsequent fall of the Iron Curtain, the majority of the stationed forces gradually left Germany, while the German troops were also reduced. This process caused an overall reduction in numbers of soldiers stationed in Germany from 1.4 million in 1989 to 0.5 million in 1995 (Kalmann, 1997, p. 10). The process of military conversion has continued until today. The German Army's current stationing concept, published in 2011, defines a further reduction in troop numbers, and the foreign armies also continue their withdrawal (Bundesministerium für Verkehr, Bau und Stadtentwicklung (BMVBS) (ed.), 2013, p. 4), especially the British Rhine Army.

With the continuous scaling down of the armies, more than 4000 sites in Germany with a total surface area of about 3280 km² lost their function between 1990 and 1995 (Bonn International Centre for Conversion, 1996, p. 179). The release of further military areas, covering approx. 370 km², by 2020 has been prognosticated (Bundesministerium für Verkehr, Bau und Stadtentwicklung (BMVBS) (ed.), 2013, p. 4). Besides numerous barracks and built areas, many large-scale landscapes have also remained abandoned and present a challenge to planners defining their future use. This article focuses on these sites, including airports, training areas, test facilities, and ammunition depots.

The majority of them is characterised by two specific aspects. First, most of them are extremely rich in terms of biodiversity. The lack of major traffic infrastructure, the exclusion of intensive agriculture and the military practice itself, which includes destructive activities such as tank driving and deliberate vegetation management, has led to the creation and preservation of habitats for rare species. Thanks to this and the sometimes even idyllic appearance, especially of training areas (Fig. 1), a perception is widespread nowadays of the military being perfect environmentalists. Such outstanding ecological qualities are also the focus of current political programmes. Many areas are central elements of the federal initiative "National Nature Heritage", which hands over these sites for nature preservation. Former and even partially active, large-scale military landscapes are now preserved as nature reserves and biosphere reserves, Natura 2000 areas or, since the withdrawal, even form National Parks.



FIGURE 1 Extensive grasslands of the still active military training grounds in Bergen, Lower Saxony. (Photograph by V. Butt).

Second, but surprisingly far less noticed, military landscapes constitute a political heritage. They are permeated with relics and narratives of the landscape's civilian past, its militarisation, and a century of conflict. When defining future civilian uses, inevitably decisions about the management of these remnants and thus their related memories are made—reason enough to take a closer look at the landscapes' history.

From civilian to military land

The introduction of new technologies at the turn of the 19th century has not only influenced industry hugely, but also warfare and weapon technology. To enable the military forces to test new findings and prepare for war, land was needed that served solely military purposes.

To achieve this, former civilian areas had to be depopulated. For example, for the construction of the Kurmark training area, about 80km southeast of Berlin, 17 villages with almost 4400 inhabitants were required to leave the area of the planned military grounds from 1943 onwards (Angolini, 2004, p. 12). Many witnesses and documents of that time report that if inhabitants did not leave their homes voluntarily, they were forcibly resettled and expropriated. This procedure did not end after the Second World War. The occupying troops also requisitioned civilian land, both in the East and the West. After the depopulation, the former civilian settlements became backdrops and settings for urban warfare or were purposefully destroyed. Apart from rare exceptions, only ruins have remained.



FIGURE 2 Former inhabitants visit the partially destroyed village of Gruorn, located in the Schwäbische Alb in southwest Germany. Today, only the foundations of the houses are left, while the church and schoolhouse have been reconstructed. (Photograph © Komitee zur Erhaltung der Kirche in Gruorn e.V.).

But until today, the landscape as a whole and the ruins of the settlements are key anchors for joint memories, and the dramatic experiences shared by the former village communities has given rise to a vivid culture of remembrance. Providing the sites are accessible, the resettled inhabitants and even their descendants visit the ruins of their former homes (Fig. 2); they also write books about the sites' and communities' histories, erect monuments, and even reconstruct destroyed churches or school-buildings through voluntary work.

These joint activities keep the memories alive, and, likewise, the narratives lend meaning to the site. The communities' activities and the visible traces permit places of memory to emerge, in the sense of the French historian Pierre Nora's "lieux de mémoire" (Nora, 1990, pp. 7–27), and let these memories become tangible for future generations.

The landscape's militarisation required not only space, but also a large workforce, which, owing to the circumstances under which the work was carried out during a certain period of history, is a crucial aspect of this landscape. A peak of militarisation happened during preparations for the Second World War, when forced workers, concentration camp inmates and prisoners of war were forced by the NS regime to construct military infrastructure. One example is the U-Boot Bunker Valentin in Bremen-Farge in northern Germany, where more than 1100 prisoners died of malnutrition, disease, and arbitrary executions (Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Bremen, 2015). An extraordinary number of victims is reported in the case of the labour camp Lieberose, where between 6,000 and 10,000 people were imprisoned to construct the Kurmark training area (Evangelische Kirchengemeinde Lieberose und Land, n.d.). In the years 1943–1945, more than half of the prisoners died subjected to the motto "Extermination through labour" (Evangelische Kirchengemeinde Lieberose und Land, n.d; Angolini, 2004, p. 2). The prisoners constructed the labour camps, barracks, military installations of the training area, and roads that are still partially in use today (Evangelische Kirchengemeinde Lieberose und Land, n.d.; Angolini, 2004, pp. 14–15).



FIGURE 3 Many military sites are related to atrocities. Today, a visitor centre and outdoor exhibition seeks to explain the relics of the U-Boot Bunker Valentin in Bremen-Farge and the suffering experienced here. (Image by Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Bremen / Photograph by Henry Fried).

This aspect of history is a central element of the national culture of remembrance. In many cases, also in Bremen-Farge and in Lieberose, various stakeholders aim to document the atrocities and provide an opportunity to honour the memory of the victims. State and church organisations as well as different interest groups are involved in this process. In past decades, memorials have been raised, documentation centres opened, and outdoor exhibitions have been realised (Fig. 3). Nevertheless, even after more than 70 years, these aspects have certainly not yet been investigated in depth for all sites. Much more research and documentation are still needed to achieve adequate management of the sometimes inconspicuous relics. The two topics above have been addressed for two reasons: first, to point out hidden aspects of a landscape's history and, second, to provide examples of the significance of preserving traces of the past and to relate the sites to their history. This is, as the next section will show, not always the case for other layers of military landscapes.

The untold narratives of the military dimension

Many sites in Germany were established before the First World War, used and then extended during preparations for the Second World War and later taken over by the allied or Russian armies. Each of the forces used the areas for their own national and international interests. The resulting landscapes can be seen as the infrastructure and necessary elements of national and international defence structures. Ammunition has to be stored in secure places, the air force needs bases from which to supply forces in war regions and armies need space and realistic conditions to train skills for different kinds of conflict. The landscapes have been shaped according to these needs.

Nevertheless, when discussing this aspect of history, general and almost ethical questions arise. Are military sites solely necessary infrastructure or are they not always related to politics, conflicts, and suffering? This dimension is scarcely addressed.

Earthen walls or embankments, concrete structures, rusty tanks, bunkers, barracks, testing facilities, and whole airfields remain as witnesses of such use. The traces are ephemeral, hardly understandable without explanation and far removed from widespread notions of something that is worth conserving. Military relics seem to have few advocates calling for a more conscious management or, should the sites be considered political heritage, would actually spend money on their maintenance. As a result, NS sites that require investigation as places of historical interest are falling derelict, and especially the more recent history from 1945–1990 seems to receive little attention. A current research project states that, in contrast to, for example, the UK or Denmark, where relics of the Cold War are seen as part of the national culture of memory and are partially protected monuments, there is a lack of sensitivity with regard to this era in Germany (Mählert, 2016). In many cases, the remnants are simply erased from memory by demolishing them, while others are taken over by succession. This indecisiveness and the ignorance of a disturbing past can turn dangerous. According to Aleida Assmann, known for her research and publications on the culture of remembrance, an unwanted effect may unfold if memories are lacking completely, where ghostly places emerge, peopled by the imagination or haunted by suppressed memories (Assmann, 1999, 21).

Revealing a heritage of conflict

The interpretation and management of a site's military dimension is a challenging task, which cannot be answered in a general way. Each site, and sometimes even each historical phase, requires individual solutions. This leads to the question of how landscape design can approach these sites or even support the establishment of a culture of remembrance.

To answer this question, interviews, talks, and literature review have been employed to explore the theoretical background and obtain deeper insights into the landscapes' identities. Student design studios in the field of landscape architecture were set up and realised projects investigated. For this article, two examples have been chosen that focus on the management of the military past. They will show how conflicting heritage interpretations can be negotiated and forgotten narratives of the military past can be revealed.

The importance of preventing, in the words of Assmann, "ghostly places" (1999, p. 21) from emerging becomes evident at the former army research centre south of Berlin: the "Heeresversuchsstelle Kummersdorf-Gut/ Sperenberg airfield". After land had been bought and partially expropriated, from 1874–1877 a shooting ground and later test facilities for railways were installed in the forests of Kummersdorf (Pöhlmann, Bauermeister, Sommerer, 2014, pp. 12–17). Remnants of these are still visible today. The site's military history continued during WWII, when research and tests, for example on guns, battle tanks, intermediate-range missiles and nuclear bombs, were carried out (Pöhlmann, et al., 2014, pp. 24–31). These technological findings were closely related to atrocities committed on forced workers in the arms production and had a devastating impact, as the weapons were used for bombarding European capitals in World War II (Pöhlmann et al., pp. 27–28). The barracks and the military airport that were later built on the same site by the Soviet Army have been abandoned since 1994.



FIGURE 4 Ruins of a test facility in Kummersdorf. (Photograph © Denkmalamt Teltow-Fläming).

Today, although the site is a protected monument and partially a flora-fauna habitat and nature reserve, the approximately 4000 objects of military origin (Aumann, 2015, p. 120) are becoming derelict (Fig. 4), and ecological succession is transforming the open heathland. Not only is there a lack of heritage management, very little research has as yet been found, for example, on the role and extent of forced labour on this site during WWII.

Even today access is strictly limited to a few guided tours; fences and walls surround the area. When exploring this abandoned place with guides and talking to people from the neighbourhood, it seems to be unwanted, reminding people of a history no one wants to remember. The Sperenberg airfield was even discussed as a location for Berlin's new airport, and plans were made to build wind turbines in such a way that ignored the area's significance. But a local initiative is striving to install a museum, and conservationists are trying to foster research, documentation and management, while facing a lack of financial resources. These problems and contradictory ideas were the starting point for a landscape architecture design studio at Leibniz Universität Hannover which searched for future strategies for this site. Besides asking how to approach its complex history and ecology, another challenging question was how to preserve a site of more than 20 km², which would involve an enormous amount of work.

Student Nicole Schüler found the starting point for a possible answer in a small group of local volunteers who were already engaged in the site's preservation (Schüler, 2016, p. 227). She used this existing structure as an anchor for her concept based on "voluntourism" (pp. 227–257). The basic idea of voluntourism is the combination of holiday activities with active engagement. To ensure a professional process, Schüler created an organisational system with a professional management board that leads the activities of different voluntourist groups. A spatial masterplan that relates to the aims of habitat management, monument preservation, reconstruction and recreation, combined with an underlying time-scale (Fig. 5), constitutes the backbone of all activities.

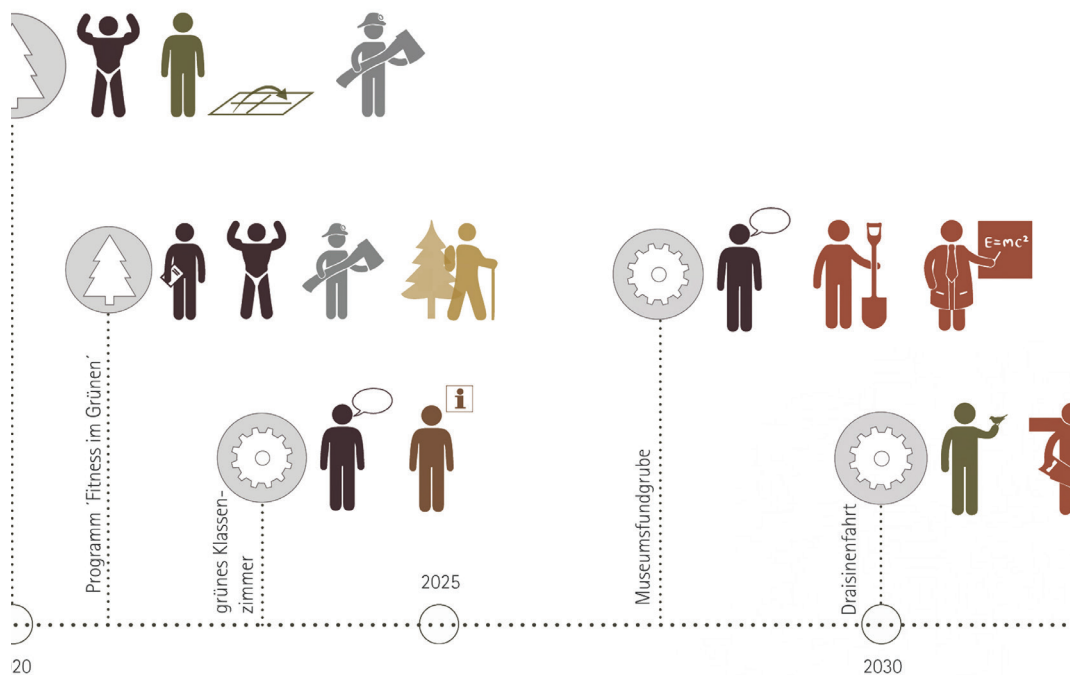


FIGURE 5 Voluntourist activities follow a time-scale to realise the masterplan. (Schüler, 2016).



FIGURE 6 One important aim of the concept is to increase the site's legibility. The student proposes to fell trees (left) to reconstruct parts of the 12km-long shooting ranges (right) that were installed to test the flight characteristics and impact of the tested ammunition. (Schüler, 2016).

A wide range of interested volunteers, such as ecologists, preservationists and historians, ensures high diversity among the voluntourists. The proposed activities include measures such as felling trees to reveal the overgrown former shooting ranges (Schüler, 2016). This supports two aims: the regeneration of open heathland structures and the partial reconstruction of a spatially impressive military heritage (Fig. 6). Parallel to this, historians are researching the site's past, and relics are being conserved or reconstructed. Other groups offer or join guided tours and events for tourists, students and pupils. Neighbours are also one of the target groups. With their vivid memories of the more recent history they are encouraged to offer guided tours and share their views (Schüler, 2016).

This example shows how a heritage of conflict can be brought back into public awareness. The importance of integrating a wide range of people with different perspectives when defining a site's future is also promoted by the geographers Tunbridge and Ashworth, who coined the word "dissonant heritage" (1996). One of their statements is that each individual and each different group, have their own interpretations of the past and also different expectations of what is defined as "heritage". One strategy of dealing with this is to create a broader heritage that can integrate this diversity (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). In the student's proposal for Kummersdorf-Gut/Sperenberg, volunteers of different ages and backgrounds, with various memories and interpretations, meet and discuss the diverse aspects of the past and the question of which relics are particularly worth conserving and why. Professionals and volunteers can work on a joint heritage – one that can accommodate different interpretations. By means of such efforts, memories are handed down, while at the same time the place can be filled with new memories of current generations.

Another example of managing the military traces can be found near Brügger in Northrhine-Westfalia, close to the Dutch border. At first, the area was partially used as an airfield for gliders, during WWII as a fuel depot, then by the British Army for detonating unexploded bombs. After 1948, the British Army started to fence off the whole area (NRW-Stiftung, n.d.) to install the "3 Base Ammunition Depot", better known as the "ammunition depot Brügger-Bracht", which was the largest of its kind in Western Europe during the Cold War. This location provided support for the conflicts in Kuwait and the activities of the UN Protection Force in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Germes-Dohmen, 2006, p. 120). 25,000-50,000 tons of ammunition were stored (Germes-Dohmen, 2006, p. 96) in open-air and indoor stores behind 6- to 8m-high protective embankments (Fig. 7). Before the army withdrew in 1996, they dismantled and sold the metal building structures; others were dismantled during the subsequent conversion process (P. Kolshorn, interview, September 19, 2018). Today, only a few of the approximately 200 buildings remain (NRW-Stiftung, n.d.). Even parts of the internal 15km-long railway track system were deconstructed by the British Army (NRW-Stiftung, n.d.).



FIGURE 7 Aerial view of the former ammunition depot in Brüggem-Bracht, 1997: A rectangular pattern of embankments surrounds open and indoor stores. (Aerial photograph © LAND NRW (2018) – Licence: dl-de/by-2-0 (www.govdata.de/dl-de/by-2-0)).

During its military use, the site was maintained intensively. To prevent fires, the army kept the vegetation short on the embankments, around the buildings and paths (NRW-Stiftung, n.d., (a)). This management and the poor, sandy soils created habitats similar to the former sheep pastures. While still being used militarily, the ecological value of this site was recognised and researched (P. Kolshorn, interview, September 19, 2018). This was the motivation to transform more than two-thirds of the site into a nature reserve, now owned by a foundation and managed by professional ecologists. The local population welcomed this decision and can now find recreation in the region's largest nature reserve (P. Kolshorn, interview, September 19, 2018). The landscape maintenance is carried out with the help of Konik ponies, Galloway cattle, fallow deer and approximately 600 sheep and goats (P. Kolshorn, interview, September 19, 2018; NRW-Stiftung, n.d., (a)).

Although the British army removed many objects, they left plenty of relics, such as a 10km-long grid of roads, loading terminals, parts of the rails and the buildings' concrete foundation slabs (P. Kolshorn, interview, September 19, 2018). On the initiative of the foundation that owns the land and supports both nature and culture, many of these site-specific relics remained to point to links with the Cold War and the site's history (P. Kolshorn, interview, September 19, 2018).

The number of roads was reduced to protect ecologically sensitive zones, while a 100m-long boardwalk on the crest of an embankment affords visitors wide views. The site is public, but the fence from military times has been kept, primarily to keep the animals on the terrain (P. Kolshorn, interview, September 19, 2018). But the strongest and most impressive relics are the several kilometres of embankments, which are simultaneously a unique habitat and a relic of the Cold War (Fig. 8).

Although the driving idea was not design-based, the interventions create intriguing effects. The embankments as topographical landscape elements have been gutted of the buildings that once served as the "filling" but have thereby become even stronger and stage the site's history. They form the area's backbone, providing a strong, rhythmic structure and enabling an impressive spatial experience (Fig. 8). This effect is even enriched by the little "irritations" along the way, when road markings lead into the forest or rail tracks disappear into grassland (Fig. 9).



FIGURE 8 Former ammunition storage in Brüggem-Bracht. Almost all buildings were removed, but the protective embankments of Europe's once largest ammunition depot still structure the site. (Photograph by V. Butt).



FIGURE 9 Relics of former infrastructural elements at Brüggem-Bracht. Road markings lead into the forest (Photograph by V. Butt),



FIGURE 10 Rail tracks disappear into the grassland (Photograph by M. Blaas). Such fragments arouse the visitors' curiosity.

Conclusions

This article asked which narratives are hidden in the post-military landscapes and looked more closely at several of them, exploring each site's history from the initial depopulation, atrocities committed during their militarisation and their passage through several political eras. The first thing that appears obvious is that certain aspects of history such as the resettlements and the forced labour are not always researched and considered enough yet. But each in their own way, they are parts of a culture of remembrance. The described examples of a vivid culture of remembrance show the enormous potential of the related sites, which can be designed in ways that allow history to be communicated to future generations.

This potential should be extended to Germany's complex military relics and narratives, which tend to be forgotten. A public discussion about the societal meaning of a past full of conflict and its traces is needed. Each site's history differs, and not all sites have equally high potential to be developed as a place of political education and remembrance. But if an area has the capacity to make important moments of history understandable or if the site's meaning is considered as being of historical importance, the arduous path towards active heritage management should be taken. The idea of voluntourism in the example of Kummersdorf-Gut/Sperenberg is an approach towards revealing different views of a heritage site and negotiating them within a jointly defined heritage.

The current focus is on ecological issues alone, with concepts that integrate both political and ecological aspects scarcely being commissioned. A shift away from distinguishing between "natural heritage" and "political heritage" towards integrative approaches is needed and should be fostered by political and administrative stakeholders as well as by funding programmes. The example of the ammunition depot, in particular, shows how both aspects can be linked and that the conservation of political traces and scars can even be motivated by ecological aspects.

Planners and landscape architects can play a key role in creating future landscapes that are perceivable as sites both of fascinating nature and of historical depth.

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