

Gardeners don't fight wars:

Prussia's Arcadia behind barbed wire - An exhibition in Sacrow Manor, Potsdam

Bettina Greiner /

Berlin Center for Cold War Studies / Hamburg Institute for Social
Research

"As if you had slit a painting by Rembrandt with a knife" – the Prussian Palaces and Gardens along the river Havel, today a UNESCO Heritage Site, were for 28 years a border region between the two German states. Walls, fences and death strips sliced through this unique cultivated landscape, created during the reign of Friedrich Wilhelm IV by Peter Joseph Lenné and Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau on both banks of the river along the lines of English landscaped gardens. The Prussian arcadia survived the monarchy, Weimar Republic, the Nazi dictatorship and even World War II largely intact – until August 13, 1961, when the parklands at Babelsberg, the Neuer Garten, Sacrow, Glienicke and Pfaueninsel became a theater of the Cold War, the border between East and West bisecting them straight through the middle of the river.

The scars of the East German border regime that took the lives of at least nine people in this area alone can no longer be seen today. The old perspective relationships among the many palaces and other historic showplaces along the near and far banks of the Havel and Jungfernsee Lake have likewise since been restored. Through November 13, 2016,



thoroughly worthwhile exhibition at Sacrow Manor House tells the story of the eastern parklands' brutal destruction – and their painstaking restoration since the fall of the Wall on November 9, 1989. It's told by Western and Eastern landscape gardeners who held responsibility for the park facilities for decades on their respective sides of the frontier.

One can only pay homage to their dedication to this historic gesamtkunstwerk, which they tried for decades to protect against disfigurement by the state that, on the East German side, knew only one objective: to shield the "anti-fascist bulwark" against "border violations." To create a clear field of fire against those trying to escape, some 30 hectares – nearly two-thirds of the eastern parklands – were turned into a lunar landscape. Centuries-old trees were felled, gardens destroyed by herbicides then tilled, flattened and paved over. Concrete walls, mesh fences and barbed wire skirted the area, watchtowers were built, canine patrol areas installed and, at the river's edge, mats of nails. Moreover the historical visual axes to the other side – in the West – blocked by construction or left to become overgrown. Anyone going for a stroll in the Neuer Garten should under no means be able to see across the border.

According to the East German reading of history, Prussia was the forerunner of the Nazi state. Prussia's legacies were therefore accorded hardly any landmark protection, which was why the gardeners had few means to resist constant demands for the expansion of the border fortifications. They watched helplessly as the destructive projects progressed. It is, however, their proud achievement that the historic



dairy works built according to plans by Gottfried Langhans in 1790 were rescued. It was a similar story with the Church of the Redeemer in Sacrow, built in 1844 by Ludwig Persius. Its tower became part of the border defenses; the progressively decaying church nave was marooned in no man's land directly on the Havel. Both of these jewels were visible from the West, their destruction would have harmed East Germany's efforts at international recognition. It was an argument that the gardeners found effective. State leader Erich Honecker even eventually permitted the restoration of the church's roof in the mid-1980s through private donations from West Berlin.

The thirst for international recognition played into the gardeners' hands in other ways too. When UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim visited East Germany in 1976, three years after the state's official inclusion in the international community, he was housed in the Cecilienhof palace – the site of the 1945 Potsdam Conference. Situated in the Neuer Garten at the Jungfernsee lake, his lodgings looked out directly onto a concrete wall, the unsightliness of which he immediately commented on. What ensued can be retraced in the files. For the following 13 years, until the fall of the Wall, a specially established state commission required that the inner façade of the wall be planted with greenery. Yet because of border guards' extensive use of pesticides, nothing grew there anymore. "For us gardeners it was a private triumph," recalled one of the participants.

After the Berlin Wall fell, their life's dream, the healing of this cultivated landscape, was fulfilled. With the same commitment with which they had



earlier used their resources as gardeners to caricature the state frenzy for securing its borders, they now set about restoring the devastated spaces along historical plans. The exhibition also traces these efforts with abundant documents, pictures and films. In the process, visitors learn a thing or two about landscape architecture and the gardening arts. And, anyone strolling afterward through Sacrow Park or taking the water taxi to Moorlake or the dairy works on the far bank will be grateful. Here, something has grown together that belongs together. Today in Prussia's arcadia, nothing recalls the border and its brutality that divided a people and a landscape.

The exhibition curated by Jens Arndt [Gärtner führen keine Kriege. Preußens Arkadien hinter Stacheldraht](#) is open through 13 November 2016 in the Sacrow manor house (Schloss Sacrow), Weinmeisterweg 8, 14469 Potsdam-Sacrow. Organizer is the non-profit association [Ars Sacrow e.V.](#) You can find events accompanying the exhibition [here](#).

Dr. Bettina Greiner, historian, works for the [Hamburg Institute for Social Research](#) and is coordinator of the [Berlin Colloquia on Contemporary History](#) and the [Berlin Center for Cold War Studies](#). She has written on political repression and (camp) imprisonment in the Twentieth Century.



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