

An Archaeological Journey Along the Iron Curtain

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Working with heritage from the Cold War, you often come across the term Iron Curtain as an expression, such as: “behind the Iron Curtain” or “the fall of the Iron curtain”. I started to wonder what was really behind this term but when I started investigating, it turned out it was less straightforward than I had first anticipated. This became the topic of my PhD and for five years I “lived with” the Iron Curtain in literature, in films and, as the archaeologist that I am, visiting sites and looking at the material leftovers that it had left behind.

Right in the beginning of the work with my thesis, I met an old friend and explained my research topic but he soon started to look a bit uncomfortable. Eventually he asked me: “But you do know that the Iron Curtain actually never existed, right? It was just a metaphor”. This comment stayed with me throughout my research and reflected my work, because in one sense he was completely right; the Iron Curtain was a metaphor for the division of Europe, of the division between an East and a

West. But at the same time there was no denying that there had also been heavily militarised borders throughout Europe and a major surveillance and military operation to keep these borders running, to keep people in, or out as desired. I was curious: did the metaphor and the physical remains tell the same story?

So, I set on a journey and I travelled to several sections of the former Iron Curtain, in particular in Berlin, between former Czechoslovakia and Austria, and between former Yugoslavia and Italy. The further south I got the more uncertain the route of the former Iron Curtain seemed. Many people would tell me that I was wrong to look at the former Yugoslavia and Italy border as part of the Iron Curtain and it *was* exactly this I was after, because in those discussions it became clear what people would consider the Iron Curtain to be. People would tell me it *was* the Iron Curtain because you could not travel across the border without rigorous checks and visas, or they would say that it was *not* the Iron Curtain as there were no armed military patrolling



Fig. 1: The small stretch of barbed wire and watch tower still standing in the Czech town of Čížov bear witness to a less peaceful time here near the border with Austria.



Figs. 2–3: Many of the border guard stations along the Czech-Austrian border have been left untouched since they were abandoned and still hold many remainders of those who guarded the Iron Curtain here.

it. The most common point people made, however, was that it was *not* the Iron Curtain as there was no large concrete wall. This shows how connected the idea of the Iron Curtain had become with the Berlin Wall – one of the strongest symbols of the metaphor of the Iron Curtain.

For two years I drove and walked along parts of the former Iron Curtain. I followed the entire line from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic on Google Earth. I got people to write to me, I met and interviewed people along the way who had different stories to tell: former soldiers, people crossing the border and people just living by it. I visited archives, studied photos and old maps (in particular those produced by the people who guarded it).

One of the most striking things that I found was how different the Iron Curtain was considered in the three different areas that I looked at. In Berlin developments were much dependent on how remains were treated soon after the Wall fell when many of the border structures were removed immediately. This was, in turn, followed by a move to preserve those structures that remained, making these material traces part of a heritage discourse where sites were discussed and memorialised. In the two other areas things looked very differently. On the border between what is now the Czech Republic and Austria there were many physical reminders of the sites still present. Although the majority of the fences and watch towers had been



Fig. 4: Some traces represent an image of the official political line



Fig. 5: Other traces give us more of an insight to the daily lives of the border guards: stickers of shoe polish

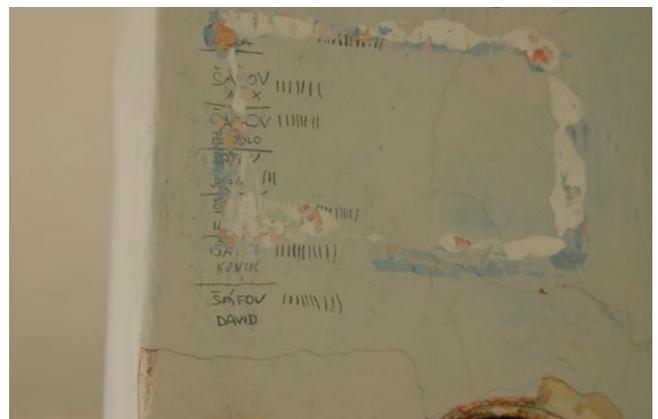


Fig. 6: A score sheet demonstrating some sort of competition between two neighbouring border guard stations. What they were competing in is unclear. The remains of the former militarised border are also present along the Slovenian-Italian border but here they are more subtle and harder to spot.



Fig. 7: A former patrol path in the town of Nova Gorica has been made into a cycle path stretching the entire length of the city.

removed some still remained intact. These had not become part of a heritage discourse but were kept as a private initiative, the reason why being rather unclear (Fig. 1). Other types of border remains, mainly connected to the guarding of the border had mainly been left. In some places buildings or materials were reused but mostly they were just left and had reached different stages of ruin. This created very different types of remains that informed me about people who guarded these borders; former border stations with plenty of remainders of the people that lived there, such as stickers from their shoe polish, a score sheet from some sort of competition with a neighbouring border unit. There were more remote guard huts with even more graffiti (most probably as the senior officers spent less time here) (Figs. 2–3).

On the border between what is now Slovenia and Italy the border was not necessarily thought of as the Iron Curtain when it was a functioning border or even soon after. In this area there was a long history of changing borders and people who lived in the town that I visited had changed nationality with every generation for the last three generations. But something changed here as Slovenia was entering the EU, maybe as a way to connect to Europe and to what was seen as a longer European history. Sites and museums have become referred to as sites connected to the former Iron Curtain and the two towns that



Fig. 8: Part of the border here runs through the two towns of Nova Gorica and Gorizia which before World War II was one town. During the Cold War period the square in front of Nova Gorica's train station was divided by fences and guards. Now the border is marked by flowers.



Fig. 9: Remnants of the barbed wire which helped guard the border during the Cold War period can still be found in some places.



Fig. 10: Graffiti left by border guards in a watch tower along the former Yugoslavian border show the guards counting down the days of their military service.

meet by the border here, Gorizia (in Italy) and Nova Gorica (in Slovenia) have been referred to as the Berlin of the south – a divided city (Figs. 4–5).

This is nothing strange, we are constantly shaping our his-

tory with the stories we choose to tell and how we tell them. We hold onto these stories by the materials that we chose to leave, keep or remove. This has also created a unique material to understand, not only the Iron Curtain as a metaphor and a



Fig. 11: Mount Sabotin, directly north of the towns of Nova Gorica and Gorizia, the border runs along the ridge of the mountain.



Fig. 12: Along the ridge of Mount Sabotin two tracks run parallel on either side of the border bearing witness of a period when border guards from either country were not allowed to cross, even with a single step, creating these dual paths.

functioning border during the Cold War, but also to understand the way we have tried to make sense of this history after the Cold War and still do today.

When I started, I did not know much about the Iron Curtain. I was 15 when it came down and had never visited any of the sites connected to it. When I started, my idea of the Iron Curtain was very much connected with the metaphor, i.e. based on the image of the Berlin Wall. What I came to realise is that looking

at several sites of the former Iron Curtain provided so much more variety of sites and a much deeper understanding of the people connected to it than I could ever think was possible.

My thesis is available for free download on our library website: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:680598/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

All photographs by Anna McWilliams



Figs. 13–14: Mount Sabotin also holds material reminders of the previous military presence here.