

Remember the Blue Belt. The Cold War in the Cold Water

Peer Henrik Hansen

“Memory is an integral part of the self-understanding of both states and individuals. A shared space for memory helps to nourish the idea that a shared historical consciousness or collective memory exists.”¹

Places where everyone can remember and think about the common past are to be found in all societies worldwide. But shared spaces and places for reflection and remembering are very different as soon as you cross a border to a neighbouring country. The German term *Gedenkstätte* reflects the way that certain places and episodes have been given a special meaning for the generations to come. Concentration camps, the Berlin Wall and statues portraying German statesmen are some of the best known *Gedenkstätten* in Germany. According to Danish scholar Inge Adriansen, the Cold War has become an integral part of the German self-understanding and an important contribution to the collective German memory.

As the northern neighbour of Germany, Denmark has a different tradition and approach to the past and to remembering the common Danish history, and this has changed visibly in the last 70 years. Despite its modest geographical size, Denmark has a vast number of monuments, memorials and meeting places. The majority of places are focused on celebrating the constitution of 1849, the agrarian reforms between 1733 and 1800, the reunification in 1920, remembering wars and casualties, military cemeteries, occupation and resistance between 1940 and 1945, and the liberation in 1945.

In more recent Danish history, the German occupation of Denmark of 1940–45 marks a turning point in Danish politics and history. Therefore, three important dates are still being remembered annually in Denmark. The German occupation of Denmark in 1940 is remembered on April 9th, the sinking of the Danish fleet in 1943 is remembered on August 29th, and on the evening of May 4th the German surrender of 1945 is being

remembered by putting candles in the windows. The celebration goes on to May 5th (Figs. 1 and 2).

Many of the monuments, places and dates have to do with Denmark’s complicated relationship with Germany over the centuries. However, over the years, the Cold War changed the Danish scepticism towards West Germany. One of the leading Danish experts on the Danish-German relationship, Karl Christian Lammers, described the development between the two countries in the 20th century: “The relationship with Germany during this period developed from hate, enmity and distance to cooperation, understanding and mutual respect, not only because the old points of dispute such as the border and the statues of the minorities had been solved in a reasonable way for both countries. But also because Germany, West Germany that is, from a Danish point of view had improved and changed its approach towards the neighbour in the north.”²

In great contrast to these celebrations, several topics have not led to monuments, places or rituals of remembrance. Among the things that haven’t been found worth mentioning are Denmark as a colonial power, the Dano-Norwegian Dual monarchy, Holstein as part of the Danish kingdom, women and workers, personalities of industry and trade, United Nations, NATO, EU, and the Cold War.³ According to the late Danish historian Inge Adriansen, “...the history of the past 55 years is not reflected in the creation of new sites of memory in any noticeable way – neither on the physical nor on the symbolic level.”⁴

The Danish tradition of creating monuments and places for remembering our common past more or less died out years ago. And then again not really. In 2009, the Danish government



Figs. 1 and 2: Mindelunden - a place for remembering the resistance and the casualties during World War II - is probably the closest you will come to a Danish „Gedenkstätte“ (photos: Danculture.dk)

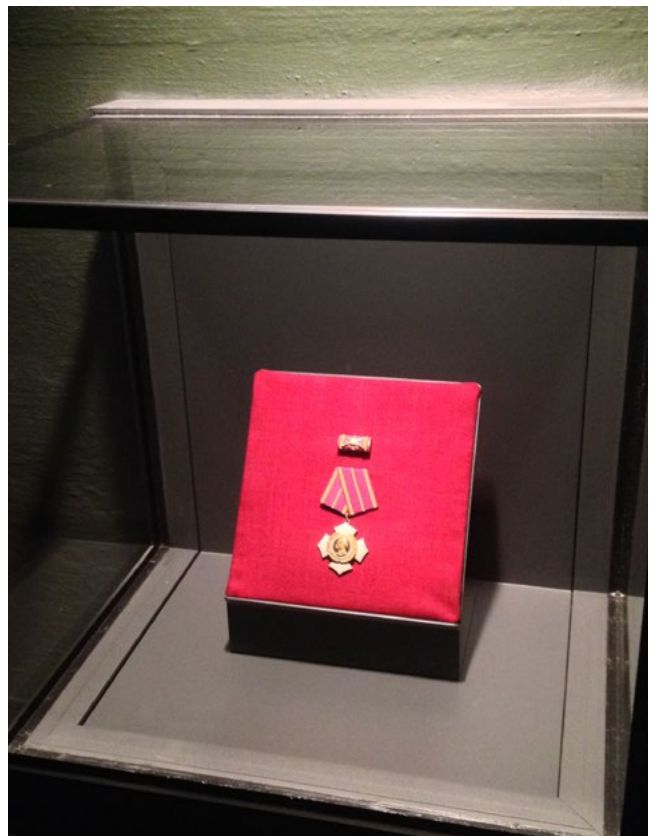


Figs. 3 and 4: One of the few examples of a Danish „Gedenkstätte“ is the monument from 2011 remembering the participants and casualties in the operations Denmark has been a part of since 1948 (photos: Danculture.dk)

decided to create a monument in respect of all the Danes that have participated in international operations since 1948 and onwards.⁵ With all the names of the countries where Denmark has operated, with the names of the casualties over the years, and an eternal burning flame, the monument is one of the only new Danish monuments in the 21st century (Figs. 3 and 4).

In 2011, the Agency for Culture and Palaces started to look into the thousands of Danish Cold War buildings and in De-

cember 2013 the work – a list of various Cold War places – was presented. The list is in no way to be compared to the German *Gedenkstätten*, but it is a guideline to the 25 most interesting buildings and places from the Cold War. The selection was made from the approximately 1400 sites and 18.000 buildings used in Denmark during the Cold War.⁶ The construction and architecture of the sites and buildings had not been subject to prior Cold War studies, and the study reflected the existing



Figs. 5 and 6: Yesterday's political art and military decorations have become today's exhibits. One of the few known examples of the East German Blücher medal exhibited outside Germany is to be found at the Cold War Museum Langelandsfort (photos: Langelandsfort)

knowledge and level of research at that time. The result was published in an anthology presenting the 25 Danish sites together with six sites in Greenland and two on the Faroe Islands.⁷

Among the 25 sites were installations that had become Cold War museums. The Cold War Museum Langelandsfort became one of Europe's first museums on that topic when it opened in 1997. Since then, the museum has developed and hosts one of the only unique original sections of the Berlin Wall exhibited in Scandinavia. In a sense, one of the most important more recent *Gedenkstätten* in Germany, the Berlin Wall, is represented in Denmark at the Cold War Museum Langelandsfort. Here it is exhibited together with several other items from that period and among many different approaches to the Cold War (Figs. 5 and 6).

Several exhibitions have told the stories about the history of Langelandsfort, the military threat from the Warsaw Pact, the spy games, the struggle for the hearts and minds of the people, etc. Planes, bunkers, naval vessels, guns and many other things tell the story about a war that – fortunately – never broke out.

Langelandsfort was originally built because Denmark was

a frontline state and the only thing that separated us from the enemy in the GDR, Poland and the Soviet Union was the Baltic Sea. Just as the Cold War created a Green Belt across the European continent, a blue belt divided East and West (Figs. 7 and 8).

The Cold War was tense, serious and severe, also in Denmark. Other countries were much closer to the seriousness and intensity, and now and then the Danes were reminded of the conditions under which people behind the Iron Curtain were living. For many East Germans, the Baltic Sea was the last barrier to be crossed in order to reach freedom in the West. 4000 got caught by the East German authorities, but more than 900 people managed to cross the sea. Whereas almost 140 people lost their lives during the escape in Berlin, more than 160 died in the Baltic Sea.⁸ It was a very dangerous journey. The shortest route – between Ahrenshoop on Fischland to Gedser at the southern tip of Denmark – was 38 kilometres. Many died in their attempts to get to the Danish shores while others made it.⁹ Some were lucky. In the middle of this distance you would find one of the Danish lightships, *Fyrskib Gedser Rev*.¹⁰ For the crew of the lightship it



Figs. 7: On August 13, 2011, the minister of the Danish government and expert on German affairs, Lykke Friis (to the right), opened an exhibition at the Cold War Museum Langelandsfort together with Bert Greiser, one of the last East Germans who tried to escape in April 1989 (photos: Langelandsfort)



Fig. 8: Exhibition installation in the Cold War Museum Langeslandfort: Arrangement of wall and barbed wire in memory of the construction of the Berlin Wall on August 13, 1961; in the background poster of the famous photo by Peter Leibing (1941–2008) documenting the East German soldier Hans Conrad Schumann, who leapt over a barbed wire barricade at Bernauer Strasse to West Berlin on August 15, 1961. The photo motif went around the world as a "leap into freedom" and was inscribed in the UNESCO register "Memory of the World" in 2011 (cf. the article in this publication by Joachim-Felix Leonhard).

was not unusual to help East German refugees in their attempt to escape from the GDR. The escapes were made in homemade boats, kayaks, canoes, surf boards and other strange constructions. Niels Gartig was a crew member for a ten-year period between 1962 and 1972 and he estimates that more than 50 East German refugees were saved and brought on board the lightship during those years.¹¹

To the island of Langeland, where the Langelandsfort was built, several refugees from the GDR were taken after being saved by Danish fishermen. Not everybody was so lucky. Belongings from an East German couple were found on a beach on the island. Passports, money, pictures, letters, jewellery and other personal items were kept inside a sealed plastic container that had floated ashore. Danish police later found out that the young couple were caught by an East German patrol during their escape.¹²

The history of Berlin, divided Germany and the Cold War is not only a tale for the Germans. The events back then led to the neighbouring countries and to the Baltic Sea with happy outcomes as well as tragic ends. The history of the Cold War is about crossing borders, nations and political beliefs. The story about the Green Belt across Europe should be seen and told together with the story about the Blue Belt in the north, where it was easier but still dangerous to reach freedom and leave the totalitarian regimes behind.

¹ Inge ADRIANSEN: *Erindringssteder i Danmark – monumenter, mindesmærker og mødesteder*, Copenhagen 2010. p. 29.

² Karl Christian LAMMERS: *Hvad skal vi gøre med Tyskerne bagefter? – Det dansk-tyske forhold efter 1945*, Copenhagen 2005, pp. 269f.

³ ADRIANSEN, *Erindringssteder i Danmark*, p. 443.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ <https://www2.forsvaret.dk/omos/organisation/kastellet/Monumentet/Pages/Monumentet.aspx>

⁶ The original list showed a comprehensive description of battle stations, headquarters, airfields, bunker facilities, intelligence installations, exercise areas, depots, regional and local command bunkers, etc.

⁷ For a digital version in Danish: <https://slks.dk/fileadmin/>

[publikationer/Kulturarv/Kold_Krig_2014.pdf](#)

⁸ <https://www.goethe.de/ins/dk/da/kul/mag/20654637.html>

⁹ For the most comprehensive Danish study see Jesper CLEMMENSEN, *Flugtrute: Østersøen*, Copenhagen 2012.

¹⁰ Years later the lightship became part of the collection of the Danish National Museum; <https://natmus.dk/presse-og-nyheder/nyhedsarkiv/2012/fyrskibet-gedser-rev-er-paa-vaerft/>

¹¹ CLEMMENSEN, *Flugtrute: Østersøen*, 2012. See also <https://www.berlingske.dk/kultur/en-historie-der-traengte-til-at-blive-fortalt>

¹² Fyns Amts Avis, 28 March 2007. Langelands Museum, meddelerarkiv D. 5. Hans Nogels story.