GARRISON TOWNS IN THE BALTIC SEA AREA

BY BEATE FELDMANN

Islands are symbols of both pleasure and danger. Their function in surveillance and defense has influenced people's daily lives for decades. The historian John Gillis has illuminated how Alcatraz and Robben Island, two of the best-known examples of historically controversial island landscapes, have been transformed into attractive sites to visit and explore. I, myself, have chosen to focus on some arenas connected with threats and unease in the Baltic Sea area – Gotland, Rügen, and Saaremaa. Large areas of land on these islands were cordoned off for long periods because of military activity, and it was only after the end of the Cold War that they became available for foreign visitors – when the islands’ geographical location in the center of the Baltic Sea no longer represented a military-strategic borderland. Gotland’s role as a Swedish outpost to the east was greatly diminished when the island’s four large regiments were phased out. Because of Estonia’s independence from the Soviet Union, the military bases that existed on the island of Saaremaa were dismantled. For Rügen, the structural changes meant that the island was no longer a part of the Eastern Bloc, but now belonged to the reunified Germany.

Until the beginning of the 20th century, Fårösund, on northern Gotland, was a community centered mostly around the lime quarries and ship-piloting operations. In connection with the Crimean War, a fishing village with only a minor military presence, a “garden city” for German military personnel and their families was built between 1936 and 1941. In the 1960s, the garrison town was once again transformed, when the East German Nationale Volksarmee built a large number of homes for both the army families and civilian inhabitants. Islands are dynamic landscapes. They have mutual interaction with the mainland as well as with other islands, while they also shape and are shaped by the life playing out in people’s everyday existence. The position that islands have as borderland areas in the Baltic Sea has been highlighted by social anthropologist Ina-Maria Greverus. From a mainland perspective, these islands have a peripheral location. But if the perspective is oriented towards the sea, the dual position of the islands emerges: as national outposts, and as central nodes in the Baltic Sea:

Insularity is the synthesis of particular collective experiences which draws from all the domains where humans shape their lives and judge the future, based not only on the present, but also on the past.

I have chosen to call these small communities garrison towns. The military presence has affected all three places both physically and culturally and has given them urban values and ways of life. What, then, is a garrison town, and what kind of infrastructure can be called “military”? According to ethnologist Aida Hachaturyan-Kisilenko, this specific type of town or municipal construction includes guarded border areas around a military base with residential blocks, schools, daycare centers, commercial activities, and some kind of hospital or smaller healthcare center near the base. The Soviet garrison town from between 1950 and 1980, she writes, constituted a specific urban mode of lifestyle, the task of which was to guarantee the military and their families safe and satisfactory conditions of life.

The importance of the military activity in the communities manifests a clear continuity – in the case of Fårösund, starting with the Crimean War in the 1850s, in the case of Dranske, starting with the First World War. But it is the world-historical events of the 1930s and ’40s that most strongly came to characterize all three communities in matters of urban planning and everyday life, and this occurred in similar ways. After the Nazi takeover in 1933, Rügen was seen as a strategic bridgehead for Baltic Sea domination. Gotland’s position in the middle of the Baltic Sea, equidistant from the Soviet coast and the Swedish mainland, meant that the island came to be in the immediate line of fire, and it thus strengthened its readiness when, in 1941, Germany attacked the USSR on all fronts. In 1939, Saaremaa prepared itself fully with the arrival of Soviet troops, when thousands of soldiers were stationed in newly built garrisons around the island.
The expansion of the refinery at Bug, a peninsula ad- jacent to Dranske, began in 1940, and, during the next five years before the start of the war in 1939, 20,000 people — among other things, five hangars, ten barracks, a large swimming center with 50 meter lanes, an officers’ ca- binet, a soccer field, an observatory, and other buildings with a total floor space of 1,000 soldiers were active on these 500 hectares. Along with the construction of a railway station, it was a major contri- bution to the physical and cultural change in Dranske. The local popula- tion had grown, and many new residents, both military and civilians, farmers, were informed that the existing buildings (thirteen single-family houses and four detached du- mes) would be demolished — without any possibility of appeal, and with minimal compensation. In 1930, construction of a garrison town that would be self-sufficient by the means of the military personnel began. As art historian Bernt Hultman has noted, fifteen semi- detached houses in tradition-bound style — including the garden designed to help make self-sufficiency possi- ble — were soon ready for occupation. Up to 1940, Dranske’s town plan, guided by National Socialist ide- ology, was expanded with an additional nineteen two- family houses, three eight-family houses, and one four- family house. Town planning was affected both physically and socially by the military hierarchy, and there were clear instructions about who would live where. Five years later, life in Dranske changed radically yet again with the end of World War II. The military popu- lation fled and the military facility at that was destroyed or dismantled. Shortly thereafter, a new era in the his- tory of Dranske commenced when around a thousand civilians, mainly by the dependents of military personnel began. While the garrison towns

This pioneering spirit with a military infrastruc- ture of both a physical and social form, arose in roughly
the Baltic Sea area in the early 20th Centuries. The plan for the

In dejevo, a more or less
cultural place diametrical to the military buildings is being planned. Only a few people are still living in the area, the Russian name Dejevo has been changed to Dejevo Karjaa. New housing will be built, it is rather the vision of the remains of the rocket site in the landscape, as a hilltop tur- estic area in a future recreational area, which has left its mark on the plans for the area. One of the bunkers has been preserved, and can be rented as a space for par- ties, including weddings. An earlier example is "Bug Baltic Sea Resort", a holiday resort with horse hotels and water sports facilities, which was intended to be a German tourist project.

While the garrison towns

The entire regiment area and several military build-
ings are protected by historical building legislation, and can be rented as a space for par- ties, including weddings. An earlier example is "Bug Baltic Sea Resort", a holiday resort with horse hotels and water sports facilities, which was intended to be a German tourist project.

In dejevo, a more or less

The vision implies, interestingly, an unproblematic
look back at the townscape that was formerly the När- miljö military community in the area at the end of the 1930s. The plan is just one in a series of previous pro- posals for the area. An earlier example is "Bug Baltic Sea Resort", a holiday resort with horse hotels and water sports facilities, which was intended to be a German tourist project.

The communities

I investigate in my dissertation
work can be described as small with strong mem- ories of major world events. The ways in which the past is highlighted and pushed aside in visions and de- cisions about the future of these small communities, as parts of the new order of the Baltic Sea Region, is part of the debate about the politics of memory and com- munity planning in the new Europe in which it wants to engage. What stories about the Cold War fit into the history of the Baltic Sea as a sea of reconciliation, a history canonized by the EU? What happens when the position of the islands in a strategic defense con- text belongs to the past, and the political and military, and cultural and social significance of the former garrison towns thus risks being erased from the collec- tive memory? In order to get an overview of how the people who have strong memories of a local heritage from the Cold War can for the ongoing construction of a commonly socially and economically tangible Baltic Sea Region?