

Same Defenses, Same Fears by Martin Roemers

Summer 1983. I'm on holiday with a friend in Germany. We're walking through a wood in an easterly direction. It must be there. Through the trees we see something grayish. We can't go any further. There's a concrete wall in front of us. There's nothing else to see. Except for the singing birds it is quiet. We walk along the wall until we reach a watchtower. A soldier is sitting inside and he looks at us. I take a picture of the lonely man in the tower. He takes a picture of us.

Fall 1989. The wall has fallen. I'm a photography student at the art academy. I drive through East Germany in my old car. On the way I pass countless Russian barracks. It looks like a completely different world from the outside. I wonder what they look like inside. I walk to the front gate and ask for permission to take a few pictures. "Njet," they say.

Winter 1998. I'm in contact with Ulrike. She works for an organisation in Brandenburg that manages the former Russian army territories. Ulrike gives me a pile of official documents with many signatures, seals, and stamps. I may go everywhere. I walk around in astonishment. The local population plundered the buildings immediately after the departure of the Russians. What remains is the beauty of decay: buildings that are about to collapse, old vehicles, car tires, an aircraft, and a peeling mural of the glory of the Soviet Union. This is the Disneyland of the Cold War.

Fall 2002. Kaliningrad. I drive through a sleepy provincial town and see a small, old, and collapsed military building. I grab a camera and tripod and take a few pictures. I walk around the building and see two Russian soldiers lying on the ground drinking beer. I decide to return to my car, but it's too late. Two guards seize me and take me to a barrack. I am held the whole day because I have to wait for an official from the FSB (formerly KGB) to come from the capital. Late in the afternoon, the stout FSB officer appears with tea and biscuits. He subjects me to a long and protracted interrogation. I tell him about my photo series of the landscapes of the Cold War. He accepts my explanation and completes a transcript of the interrogation. The final sentence reads: "Mr. Roemers has behaved in an impeccable and courteous manner the whole day." I sign it and can leave. I've lost my films.

Spring 2009. I've taken the last picture for this project in Moscow. The question I asked myself during this series was: "What are the consequences of this war that was never waged on the landscape?" I've looked for these places for eleven years between all my other work. Initially I focussed on the Soviet legacy in the old GDR, but gradually the project became bigger. Although the Cold War affected more continents, I've limited myself to East and West Europe. I've been surprised by the enormous quantities of shelters, bunkers, airfields, shooting ranges, barracks, missile bases, border barricades, and radar stations. They look identical on both sides of the Iron Curtain: the same defense mechanisms built out of the same fears.