

1989–2019 Transforming the Iron Curtain to a Green Belt

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The Morava River marks the border between Austria and Slovakia; the lowland riparian forest is of international value.

This month, Europe celebrates the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the "Iron Curtain," which split Eastern and Western Europe into two halves after World War II. Countless tragedies happened in its shadow. Today in its place lies Green Belt Europe, which is a large nature refuge. Previously, True Father suggested establishing "peace zones" between hostile nations; today True Mother champions the protection of creation. The Green Belt unites both concepts and its motto, "Borders separate, Nature unites," offers a solution for tense borders around the world.

Not all Communist nations had the same severe fortified border; the most horrible border split Germany into two hostile nations and separated Czechoslovakia from West Germany and Austria.

The border that divided Germany

Starting with the Berlin Wall, the German border sector became an inaccessible region. The Communists, who ruled East Germany, closed the 1,393-kilometer-long border with metal fences and walls, barbed wire, alarms, ditches, watchtowers and minefields. Between 1961 and 1989, at least nine hundred people were killed while trying to cross it. Around forty thousand soldiers patrolled the border on the East German side. The 850 watchtowers and observation posts were always manned by two or three guards at a time. Soldiers were not allowed to go out of one another's sight under any circumstances. If someone attempted to escape, his comrades were obliged to shoot him. Despite this fact 2,500 soldiers escaped to West Germany, others were shot and killed or injured in their attempt. About 5,500 soldiers were caught and imprisoned for up to five years for attempting to escape.

Deadly fences in Czechoslovakia

In 1948, the Communist Party gained power and ruled Czechoslovakia until November 1989. They fortified the Western border in 1951. Their Iron Curtain had three fences. The first fence was two meters high and made of barbed wire. The middle fence was 2.2 meters high and electrified under three thousand to six thousand volts.

The third fence served to bar animals from being killed by mines or electricity. Next to these fences was a twenty meter zone of plowed soil in order to spot traces (footprints) of refugees. To forestall refugees, special camouflaged wires ran through the vegetation.

The authorities tried to involve the local population from the very beginning. They told the locals that the Iron Curtain guarantees their safety from NATO attacks; many villagers worked as paid secret agents. Over four decades, 390 refugees were killed at the Czech or Slovak border -- the exact number is not known because the authorities ordered that corpses had to be buried secretly in unidentified graves. Additionally, 648 soldiers died while patrolling the border. Most of them either committed suicide or were victims of electric shock or land mines.

To come too close to the Iron Curtain was dangerous for West Europeans, too. In May 1986 two of our "Butterfly" missionaries, Inge and Mark Tolson, made a trip to the Czechoslovakian border, with its menacing watch towers. Walking along a farm track they didn't notice that they were already in no-man's land. Suddenly they observed hectic activity on one of the watch towers. Soon, an army jeep drove quickly toward them; armed soldiers with snarling guard dogs encircled them while shouting at them. The couple stood still at gunpoint, sweating and thinking about the possible implications.

After some hours, another jeep arrived with an interpreter and the interrogation began. The border guards blindfolded them and drove them away. In some building, they were taken into a room in a cellar that had large pictures of Marx and Lenin on the walls. There, they faced sharp questions. After some hours, Inge and Mark were handed over to Austrian border officials. Theirs was an unusually short experience. In similar incidents, foreigners were detained for days or weeks and accused of being foreign agents.

The same year, Inge and Mark started their underground mission in East Germany. At that time, few missionaries expected the collapse of the Communist system a few years later. Peter Ladstaetter, who was a "Butterfly" missionary to Russia remembers: "In 1986, when our missionary group visited True Parents in East Garden, one remark stuck in my mind, although I couldn't interpret it fully then. At the conclusion of his one-hour speech, Father said that we should return, endure and keep going, "since it will not last very long." We didn't dare ask for more details but kept what he had said in our hearts. The miracle at the Berlin Wall in October 1989 filled multitudes around the globe with joy and hope. One year later, on October 3, 1990, West Germany and East Germany united amid huge celebrations. The date was no coincidence: After the successful end of the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, True Father had declared October 3 to be the Foundation Day for the Nation of the Unified World.



Slovak National Reserve Sandberg, which is located in Slovakia near the Austrian border, today attracts numerous local visitors as well as those from abroad. During the communist era, it belonged to the prohibited zone; visits were restricted to a minimum.

The death zone transforms into a peace zone

Today, little remains of the fortifications. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the military demarcation line began its full-scale transformation into a peace zone. The process was not without difficulties. After reunification, land on the border reverted to its past ownership, placing it outside of state administrative control; companies bought some of it, posing the threat of ecological damage. But the far-sighted German government privately purchased land that had been in private hands to protect its ecosystem.

Since December 1989, the project, initiated by BUND (Friends of the Earth Germany) has received broad support from the public and leading environmental policymakers. Soon, numerous people started to donate to buy a strip of land to rescue it from greedy development. The public support for the Green Belt mounted in 2002 when a former Soviet Union president, Mikhail Gorbachev, took over the patronage. Gorbachev became the first person to buy a "Green Belt share" helping to purchase valuable land for future conservation. He came to open the "West-Eastern Gateway," which was erected in the midst of the Belt. "This gateway leads us into a new world," said Gorbachev in a speech that was repeatedly interrupted by applause. He urged people to remember history and use it as a lesson for all Europeans. "In 2005, German Chancellor Angela Merkel designated the Green Belt part as Germany's National Natural Heritage. Today, nature flourishes where so many human lives expired. In the space of three decades, the border region has been wiped clean of all vestiges of the past division. Only neighboring museums and

memorials remind us of the grim history.

The Green Belt is a child of the re-unification of Germany, which expanded to twenty-four nations bordering the former Iron Curtain. With a length of 12,500 km it is the longest conservation network in Europe and even worldwide! From the Barents Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south it links three thousand of nature's gems.



The Morava River floods large parts of land between Austria and Slovakia and creates a habitat similar to that in tropical rain forests.

A future model for the DMZ

German conservationists are in constant contact with South Korean conservationists and other authorities to turn the DMZ into a similar refuge for nature. "If the inner-Korean border line collapses, officials are now very well prepared for a Green Belt Korea," says project initiator Kai Frobel. He and his colleagues from the BUND (Friends of the Earth) had already conceived the project in the 1970s. "Our mission is to keep the entire Green Belt intact. Just as the forest is more than the sum of its trees, so the sections of the Green Belt gain their special status from their interconnectedness," says Frobel. Joint government and non-governmental participation help to minimize conflicts over development and preservation.

In Europe, the Green Belt holds great implications for the direction of the DMZ's preservation and use, a well-harmonized mixture of preservation and sustainable tourism. Every year, numerous bikers follow the 10,400 km long "Iron Curtain Trail" designed by Euro-Velo, leading them to three thousand natural spots: From the vineyards in southern Czechia to the mountainous border of Bulgaria and Greece; and from the bustling ports of the Baltic States to the stark beauty of Lapland. Of course, the trail has been the site for some Peace Road activities!

During my employment with the Austrian Conservation Union (*Naturschutzbund*) I helped to expand the project in Austria. My homeland bordered six Communist ruled states, home to 1,218 kilometers of Iron Curtain. During his world speaking tour in 2005, I was able to give True Father some information about the Green Belt. When a group of South Korean conservationists visited Vienna during their fact-finding tour, I welcomed them with the Korean greeting "*Anyonghaseo*." They were so surprised! This year, on the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain I gave numerous public lectures titled "From the Iron Curtain to the Green Belt," as a guest speaker at UPF, FFWPU or other events. My love for nature moves me to do so, as well as True Father's vision of establishing peace zones for man and nature. No other project better fits his vision!