

Understanding Military Zones in Central and Eastern Europe: Exclusion, Transformation and Research

The in-depth exploration of the military legacy of post-Cold War military bases in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), offered by this special issue of *Český lid*, is the final result of a long-lasting research project and cooperation among cultural anthropologists, ethnologists, historians, and researchers of cultural heritage. The project started in 2016 when the first international seminar on post-Cold War military zones in the CEE was held in Borne Sulinowo – a major former military base in Poland. The seminar resulted in the publication of the special issue of *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* in 2017, edited by Elo-Hanna Seljamaa, Dominika Czarnecka, and Dagnosław Demski (<https://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol70/>). Thanks to the willingness to continue the research on the subject and share its results, the second international seminar took place in the National Museum in Prague in 2018.¹ The articles presented in the special issue of *Český lid* build on selected presentations delivered during the seminar in Prague. The empirical data and analyses presented in this volume discuss different aspects of transformation in/within post-Cold War military zones in the CEE and come from the Czech Republic (article by *Jiří Woitsch and Karolína Pauknerová*), Germany (*Christoph Lorke*), and Poland (articles by *Dominika Czarnecka and Dagnosław Demski*).

By approaching (post-)Cold War military bases from the perspective of change and transformation, this special issue develops more diversified understanding of effects of the Soviet/Russian or local military presence in the CEE and the ways the military legacy is recycled and currently used.

Notions of the sacred, the forbidden and power are a staple part of an imaginary cabinet of ideas often discussed in anthropology. These are often related to magical, ritual and religious practices that form the core of a society's identity, a network of meanings and rules that shapes both the internal and external world. But the domain of the supernatural is not the only place where we can approach these notions and where they can affect human lives. One can just, for example, replace 'sacred' with

¹ *The Second Seminar on the Post-Cold War Military Zones in Central and Eastern Europe* was held on November 6–8, 2018, in the National Museum in Prague. Organized by the Department of Ethnology of the National Museum in Prague, the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague, the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, it was attended by fourteen scholars from eight CEE countries. The organizers would like to thank especially to Dr Jan Pohunek.

'secret', take into account forbidden areas, where only those who are initiated and follow strict rules can enter, and acknowledge that a general idea of symbolic power inherent to leaders of the society can manifest itself in a truly mundane power projection – and suddenly one will find oneself in the complex area of the military and its facilities.

Sometimes, this is not just a metaphor. Advancements in warfare during the twentieth century have led to an expansion of military spatial requirements even in the peacetime, especially during the complicated and secretive time of the Cold War. Large swathes of land have been appropriated for military exercises, weapons testing, accommodation and equipment storage, often deeply influencing lives of local civilian population.

After 1989, some claims of armed forces on shared space have been dropped. The Soviet army has vacated now independent countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Iron Curtain has fallen, and even local militaries started to transform from large conscript-driven forces to specialized modern means of power projection, abandoning their former holdings. It was an age of transformation, when many of former military installations were explored by the general public, when they had to be reintegrated into civilian society and when some of the former inaccessible areas became places of memory or tourist venues. The 'secret' military enclosures and former 'sacred' monuments of nationalism and *esprit de corps* were given new symbolic meanings as new actors, often local and formerly marginal, attempted to project their own interpretative power over history.

Soon after, an appearance of new branches of research focused on military zones and as their transformation followed. Some of these were motivated by attempts to understand the role of armies in politics and history of the twentieth century (e.g. Pecka 1998; Luňák 2007; Upmalis et al. 2012), other publications, often produced by enthusiasts (e.g. Tomíček 2006; Machala 2009; Řehounek 2013), focused on the local level (e.g. Demski – Czarnecka 2018) and direct experiences of communities affected by army presence. Natural historians have soon discovered the importance of military zones as ecologically different and often well-preserved environments (e.g. Various authors 1997), but social sciences including anthropology or even archaeology have also followed (e.g. Rak 2013; Šolcová 2010). There are also more and more publications concerning processes of heritagisation (e.g. Peil 2005; Strömberg 2010) and nature conservation within post-military zones (e.g. Ellwanger – Reiter 2019).

Four articles offered by the special issue of *Český lid* contribute to the subject by focusing on transformation processes after the final withdrawal of the foreign soldiers from the CEE states.

The post-military zones do not stand apart from the processes of change taking place in the present – they participate in, and are affected by change. We remember that post-Cold War military bases were not always accessible to the general public – not until the democratizing trend in the CEE. The post-military zones *are* products of their social context and if one accepts that their purpose is to be of service to society, they should be relevant to changing social needs and goals. Transformation can be applied by different actors, performed in diverse ways, and aimed to achieve various goals. The role of post-military sites and military remnants of the past lies in how they are *used* to create understanding.

Jiří Woitsch and Karolína Pauknerová focus on a specific secret defence installation and changes of its role before and after 1989 when it was reinterpreted as a ‘monument’ not only to its real former meaning, but to the Iron Curtain as a whole. Christoph Lorke describes the time when Soviet troops were leaving Germany and how interpretations of this event and of the character of soldiers themselves have been contemplated in public opinion and imagination in the reunified country. The article by Dominika Czarnecka delves into the exploration of the influence of tourism on military legacy and the ways it is mobilised for new purposes. Dagnoslaw Demski explores the processes of musealization (understood as the process when objects of a different use acquire new meanings as parts of museums, collections or exhibits) happening within the post-Soviet military zones in Poland and Latvia and the ways the tourist industry transforms them into ‘exhibitionary arenas’.

Although each article presents interesting data and interpretation of socio-cultural practices that have emerged in post-Cold War military zones after the final withdrawal of the Soviet/Russian army, all texts should not be read separately but in relation to each other and to articles published in the special issue of *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*. All together they provide a consistent and thorough platform within which phenomena that have developed in post-military zones after the fall of the Iron Curtain in CEE countries can be compared and some prevalent trends can be noticed. Topics, theoretical approaches, and empirical data presented in several articles within two special issues have brought us some reflections. Primarily, some prevailing and recurrent themes and insights emerge from these contributions. For years military bases were inhabited by foreign soldiers (German or/and Soviet/Russian). The collective perception of these places has been highly influenced by the ‘foreign’ past and it has not changed dramatically after the final withdrawal of the Russian troops at the beginning of the 1990s. In consequence, a ‘difficult’ and military past constitute post-Cold War military zones in Central and Eastern Europe as contested spaces. The main approaches have focused on ‘discovering’ meanings im-

bued to post-military places, and recognizing messages conveyed by state, regional, and local powers or rooted in vernacular or popular imagination. The transformation of former military bases depends on larger processes that belong to global rather than local, but the local should not be underestimated. Looking at the analyses presented in both special issues we can notice that research approaches move beyond politics and memory and community building issues towards commercialization and consumption, touristification, and new forms of mediation.

As general frames have been outlined, in the future the attention could be paid to examining more specific issues. The ‘new’ allegedly secret, forbidden and power-endowed terrain awaits to be explored, unravelled and bound by new understanding.

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