

## **“SMALL PLACES, LARGE ISSUES”: BETWEEN MILITARY SPACE AND POST-MILITARY PLACE**

***Elo-Hanna Seljamaa***

*Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore*

*University of Tartu, Estonia*

*e-mail: elo-hanna.seljamaa@ut.ee*

***Dominika Czarnecka***

*Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology*

*Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland*

*e-mail: d.czarnecka@hotmail.com*

***Dagnosław Demski***

*Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology*

*Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland*

*e-mail: d.demski2@gmail.com*

The exploration of the complicated cultural and social landscapes of post-Cold War military bases in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), offered by this special issue of *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, has its starting point in Borne Sulinowo in the north-western part of Poland. In the 1930s, this one-time German fishing and farming village became a military training area of the Third Reich and later, during World War II, a transitory camp and then a prison camp for officers. Following the takeover by the Red Army in 1945, the whole area was turned into a “closed city”: a secret military settlement that constituted one node in the intricate web of military objects woven by the Soviet Union across the CEE during the Cold War years. Borne Sulinowo, the Polish civilian town, has been in the making since the departure of the military forces of the Russian Federation from Poland in 1993 (Demski & Czarnecka 2015; Czarnecka 2015).

Characterised by layers of military presence inscribed on the built environment and instilled in local lore, Borne Sulinowo captures many of the conundrums facing former Soviet/Russian<sup>1</sup> military bases and their civilian neighbours or inhabitants. As a result, it is exceptionally suited to host and inspire comparative research on this topic. The articles presented in this special

issue build on presentations delivered during a seminar in Borne Sulnowo in May 2016,<sup>2</sup> which was dedicated to post-Cold War military zones and brought together scholars from Visegrád countries, Baltic states, Germany, and the Russian Federation.

The cultural anthropologists, folklorists, (military) historians, and researchers of cultural heritage involved in this project share an interest in lived realities of post-Cold War military spaces as they emerge from resources mined in archives and created by means of ethnographic fieldwork methods. The participants' diverse disciplinary backgrounds testify to the complexity of the phenomenon under scrutiny, as well as to its growing relevance in academia and beyond.<sup>3</sup> Rather than going into the specifics of political history or chronicling the presence of Soviet/Russian troops in the entire region,<sup>4</sup> contributions to this special issue concern individuals and local communities caught in the Cold War, in transformations initiated by the fall of the Iron Curtain<sup>5</sup> and the subsequent withdrawal of the Russian Federation forces from the CEE.

Borrowing from Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2009), this special issue focuses on people living in “small places”, in which both in the past and at present “large issues” have taken place and continue to unfold, shaping, though not determining, life and meaning making on the ground. The empirical data presented and analysed in this volume come from the Czech Republic (article by **Prokop Tomek**), Germany (**Christoph Lorke**), Hungary (**Melinda Harlov-Csortán** and **István Sántha**), Latvia (**Ilze Boldāne-Zeļenkova**), Poland (**Dominika Czarnecka** and **Dagnosław Demski**), and the Russian Federation (**Evgeny V. Volkov**). Much of it concerns everyday life in private, familial or communal settings influenced by the presence of the Soviet/Russian military or by memories and material traces of this presence. Often absent from state-level memory politics, this quotidian “stuff” points to the bias of public, officially endorsed discourses about the past.<sup>6</sup> While it cannot be erased from peoples' memories or from landscapes, it also cannot be easily included in the narratives of resistance and collective victimhood that most CEE countries have been telling about themselves since the end of the Cold War. Approached from this angle, civilians' intimate familiarity with Soviet/Russian military presence can be said to constitute “negative heritage” (Meskell 2002), “difficult heritage” (Macdonald 2009) or a legacy (Noyes 2016): a past or a marker of a past that is problematic, threatens the present, but is also meaningful and cannot be “killed off” (Noyes 2016: 388), at least not easily (cf. Tunbridge & Ashworth 1995 on “dissonant heritage”).

By approaching (post-)Cold War military bases from the perspective of the everyday, this special issue seeks to contribute to a more nuanced and diversified understanding of the nature and effects of the Soviet/Russian military presence in the CEE, and how this period and remnants thereof have been

and could be recycled and mobilised for new purposes; how the Cold War as it was lived east of the Iron Curtain is remembered and narrated under the present circumstances, which are both radically different and unsettlingly similar. Several military objects erected by the Soviet Union in its sphere of influence during the Cold War years have been recently returned to military use, modernised and enlarged in response to the altered international security situation.<sup>7</sup> Revamping former Soviet/Russian infrastructure for NATO allies protecting the CEE states from the unpredictable behaviour of the Russian Federation may come across as an ironic twist of history, yet it also testifies to the importance of trying to understand the Cold War and its consequences from multiple perspectives.

Before turning to recurrent themes and insights emerging from contributions to this special issue, a brief overview is offered of Soviet/Russian troops' presence in and withdrawal from the CEE.

## **FROM THE ESTABLISHMENT OF MILITARY PRESENCE TO THE WITHDRAWAL OF TROOPS**

Following World War II, the Soviet Union created four military formations or groups of forces in its sphere of influence, which corresponded to military districts within the USSR. The largest and best equipped peacetime administrative unit of this kind was located in the German Democratic Republic and underwent several name changes: established in 1945 as the Group of Soviet Occupation Forces in Germany, it was renamed the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany in 1954, and the Western Group of Forces in 1988 (see articles by Lorke and Volkov in this issue). The boundaries of the Northern Group of Forces (1945–1993) overlapped the Polish borders (Czarnecka and Demski in this issue), while the Southern Group of Forces was stationed first in Romania and Bulgaria (1945–1947), and later in Hungary (1957–1992) (Sántha and Harlov-Csörtán in this issue). The first Central Group of Forces (1945–1955) was based in Austria and Hungary until the former regained independent status in 1955 (Harlov-Csörtán in this issue). The second Central Group was formed in 1968 in Czechoslovakia (Tomek in this issue).

It is obvious from these dates and the changing locations of the formations that besides counterbalancing the armed forces on the western side of the Iron Curtain, these formations were instrumental in keeping the satellite states in check and suppressing democratisation processes in the region.<sup>8</sup> This is witnessed by the fact that no Soviet troops were stationed in Czechoslovakia until the 1968 Prague Spring (Tomek in this issue).

The Baltic states and their inhabitants were in a different situation, belonging as they did to the Soviet Union rather than its sphere of interest and influence.<sup>9</sup> The Baltic Military District, with headquarters in Riga, was formed as early as 1940, after the Soviet annexation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia (Beyrle 1996; on Latvia, see Boldāne-Zeļenkova in this issue). In case of a potential conflict with the West, forces located in the Baltics could be redeployed quickly to Poland and Germany (Golon 1999: 54; Laaneots 2015).

The dynamic grid of Soviet military objects in the CEE took shape gradually. While some objects were built from scratch, many larger bases utilised the infrastructure erected by tsarist Russia in the 18th and 19th centuries or by the Third Reich before and during World War II, or infrastructure built under the Habsburg Empire. The objects could assume the form of closed towns, sectioned-off town districts or single objects, and varied in their significance and level of specialisation, constituting extensive multilevel structures at both national and supranational levels.

While the establishment and functioning of Soviet military bases was a “large issue”, which shaped local landscape and influenced the life of people living in “small places”, so was the departure of troops. More often than not, long, complicated, and tense negotiations preceded and accompanied the withdrawal (Beyrle 1996). The Central Group of Forces pulled out of the Czech territory in 1990–1991 (Tomek in this issue). The withdrawal of the Western Group of Forces from Germany constituted the largest relocation of Russian troops ever during peacetime and consequently took several years, from 1991 to 1994 (Lorke and Volkov in this issue). The departure of the Northern Group of Forces from Poland began in 1991 and was completed in 1993 (Czarnecka in this issue). The process of withdrawing the soldiers of the Southern Group of Forces from Hungary, initiated in 1989, ended in 1991 (Sántha and Harlov-Csörtán in this issue; Bowers 1991: 61).

More so than in Central Europe, the Russian Federation sought excuses to prolong its military presence in the newly independent Baltic states, especially in Latvia and Estonia, where the withdrawal of troops was tangled up with issues of citizenship, as well as other legislation concerning the large Russian-speaking population residing in these countries. While the withdrawal of troops from Lithuania was completed by August 31, 1993, it took a year longer in Latvia and Estonia. Moreover, some strategically important military objects remained under the control of and inhabited by the Russian military until 1995 in Estonia and until 1999 in Latvia (Trei 2015 and Boldāne-Zeļenkova in this issue, respectively). Both countries also agreed to give permanent residence permits and social guarantees to military pensioners (see Kadak 2015: 68, and Jundzis 2014: 12–13).<sup>10</sup>

## MAKING SENSE AND USE OF WHAT WAS LEFT

The withdrawal of Russian troops from the CEE brought about an unprecedented demilitarisation of land and property. Abandoned training areas and formerly crowded garrisons turned into ghost towns evoke their extraordinary, indeed, extraterritorial, status in the past, as do the costly, often feeble top-down attempts to integrate this infrastructure into the surrounding civilian life. Success stories seem to be rare and to hinge on the availability of affordable housing, public services and transport connections to nearby bigger centres with better employment opportunities, as is demonstrated by Wünsdorf and Milovice, the former headquarters of Soviet/Russian troops in Germany and Czechoslovakia, respectively (Lorke and Tomek in this issue).

The cases of Ralsko in the Czech Republic and Mārciena in Latvia, examined here by Tomek and Boldāne-Zeļenkova, show how former Soviet military bases can become symbols of emptying countryside. Deserted apartment blocks and communal buildings in the middle of nowhere emerge as indexes of the end of the Cold War and of the failure of communism. Local residents who remember rural life as it used to be, however, may view these same structures as signifiers of the failure of capitalism and the nation-state, and give way to nostalgia for bygone days (Boldāne-Zeļenkova in this issue; cf. Dzenovska 2011).

The destruction of the Iron Curtain and the break-up of the Soviet Union prompted groups and individuals alike to reinvent themselves. For Soviet/Russian servicemen stationed in the CEE, the collapse of the USSR meant not only many practical and economic difficulties but also a decline in their social status (Volkov in this issue). The same holds true for many Russian-speakers in the Baltic states, as well as for those individuals and communities throughout the CEE who had lived in symbiosis with foreign troops and profited from their presence (see, for example, Lorke, Boldāne-Zeļenkova, and Sántha in this issue).

One of the recurring, if not overarching, themes in this volume is the efforts by both individuals and collectives to make sense of the local past and of themselves in the flow of time against the backdrop of national narratives that tend to be built on the negation and condemnation of the socialist era. From the point of view of states that lost their independence or full control over their internal matters and territory to the Soviet Union, the Soviet/Russian military presence and its consequences serve as painful and sometimes also shameful reminders of events that should not have happened. The experiences and memories of the inhabitants of “small places” are more diverse and particular, sometimes also self-contradictory, and expressing them serves functions different than the large narratives forged by nation-states.

Almost every “small place” explored in this special issue is characterised by a multi-layered military presence, containing elements and traces left behind by the armies of different powers, waves of settlements and in many cases (see the contributions by Czarnecka, Demski, Harlov-Csorján, and Tomek) also by changing national borders. The multi-layered character of the military presence on the former Soviet/Russian bases is revealed not only in the built environment and ruins but also in locals’ memories and narratives of displacement, deportations, unwanted neighbours, and acts of violence. However, there also are stories of illicit trafficking in fuel, vegetables, and other goods, attending cultural events, and shopping in well-equipped army stores. Objects associated with the Soviet military, such as the “Russian airport” in the Hungarian region of South Vértés, analysed by Sántha, can serve as mnemonic devices or points of references that generations of narrators use to recount their own lives or those of others and to comment upon other, more distant or recent events that they associate with World War II and interactions with foreign soldiers.

More often than not, interactions and encounters between the military and local civilians crossed – and sometimes transgressed – ethnic and ethno-cultural boundaries, and entangled relationships between ethnically marked military and civilian realms form another recurrent theme in contributions to this special issue (see, in particular, the articles by Lorke, Volkov, Czarnecka, Demski, Sántha, and Tomek; cf. Satjukow 2005). When discussing official and organised, as well as spontaneous and private, occasions for inter-ethnic and inter-cultural communication, it is important to include the perspective of Russian/Soviet servicemen stationed in the CEE: their perceptions of these encounters, of their mission in the CEE, and of the places they were forced to leave (Volkov in this issue). Online networks and archives created by former servicemen and their family members, a topic touched upon by both Boldāne-Zeļenkova and Lorke, open different windows through which to explore Cold War military bases in the CEE, the military’s interactions with the local population and landscapes, and the void created by their departure.

## **THE (BROKEN?) PROMISES OF TOURISM**

In the present era of “experience economy” (Pine & Gilmore 1999), tourism is often presented as *the* means for maintaining life in peripheral rural areas. Many of the post-military landscapes are rich in natural beauty and rare species. The decades-long presence of the Soviet/Russian military in the CEE caused serious ecological damage, the assessment and elimination of which could only begin after the withdrawal of troops, but it also contributed to nature conser-

vation by means of creating “green belts” or large territories closed off from ordinary utilisation of land and natural resources (see contributions to Sepp 2011). This paradox of simultaneous purity and contamination seems to have played a role in making post-military landscapes susceptible to diametrically opposed interpretations motivated by particular goals. While lakes and forests attracted settlers to Borne Sulinowo in the early 1990s, national media and the political elite constructed this area as a degraded landscape hazardous to human beings. This image of Borne Sulinowo as a place damaged by Soviet/Russian troops helped to legitimise the new regime, while also serving the business interests of competing tourist destinations (Czarnecka in this issue).

Vast military training areas are used for paintball, treasure hunts, races of military vehicles, reenactments, and other bodily and sensory activities tourists can immerse themselves in (Tomek and Lorke in this issue; see also Pohunek 2015). Former military bases and other objects have become destinations for tourists interested in particular historical eras or events, architecture, industrial heritage or in military history in general (see Demski in this issue). Inhabitants of former Soviet/Russian garrisons face the dilemma of how to renovate and modernise the built environment around them, while striving to preserve the original military features and aesthetics that attract tourists.

While tourism is a source of income for some, it directly or indirectly influences everybody’s life, making it less comfortable and contributing to self-musealisation (Pickering & Westcott 2003: 4–5). Touristification is based on careful choices, not all of which are of the locals’ making. Decisions to renovate certain buildings and not others are often made at the national level, in Brussels, in the offices of transnational banks or other places removed from “small places” and their inhabitants. Several contributors to this special issue (e.g. Harlov-Csörtán and Boldāne-Zeļenkova) draw attention to the tendency to prioritise the more distant, pre-socialist past at the expense of preserving military objects from the Cold War era. Depending on the context and point of view, this may indicate a refusal, failure or inability to touristify the intimate relationship to the Soviet/Russian military past. Submitting it to external examination requires distance. While this can be built up over time, is it desirable? For individuals or localities, at a national or international level, what is at stake in remembering or forgetting?

The contributions to this special issue suggest that the process of making sense of the Soviet/Russian military presence in, and its consequences for, “small places” and their inhabitants is very much an on-going process closely connected with national memory politics and various interpretations of past and current “large issues”. What may be deemed shameful or painful and silenced, or overlooked at the national level, focused on generalisations, is

conspicuously present at the local level and needs to be dealt with for successful self-identification to take place.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> When the Soviet Union ceased to exist in December 1991, it had a significant military presence in the CEE. Moreover, as contributions to this special issue demonstrate, “Soviet” and “Russian” were often perceived to be interchangeable categories in everyday parlance. The expression “Soviet/Russian” is used in the introduction in an effort to capture these complexities.

<sup>2</sup> *The Seminar on the Post-Cold War Military Zones in Central and Eastern Europe* was held on May 26 and 27, 2016, in the Cultural and Educational Center in Borne Sulinowo. Organised by the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore at the University of Tartu, and the Museum Chamber of Borne Sulinowo, it was attended by fourteen scholars from eight CEE countries. See, e.g., <http://www.gawex.pl/wiadomosci/wydarzenia/11347/W-Bornem-Sulinowie-naukowcy-debatowali-o-powojennych-bazach-wojskowych>, last accessed on November 27, 2017.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see information about the 2018 conference *Military and Post-Military Landscapes*, organised by Czech scholars: <http://www.historickageografie.cz/cechg2018>, last accessed November 27, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding Soviet/Russian troops’ presence in and departure from various CEE countries, see, for example, Anušauskas 2015 (Lithuania), Haud 2015 (Estonia), Hoffmann & Stoof 2013, and Kowalczuk & Wolle 2010 (Germany), Krogulski 2001 (Poland), Pataki 2000 (Hungary), Pecka 1996a and 1996b (Czechoslovakia), Upmalis et al. 2006 (Latvia).

<sup>5</sup> Until 1955, the Iron Curtain ran through the middle of Austria. After the Soviet forces withdrew from Austria, the Iron Curtain moved to the borders of Austria with Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

<sup>6</sup> Scholars engaged in memory studies have in recent years drawn attention to changes in the ways the period of late socialism (mid-1950s or 1960s to late 1980s) has come to be remembered and represented in autobiographical accounts, as well as various genres of popular culture, emphasising the emergence of the everyday as a point of entry into making sense of and representing the past (Jõesalu 2017; Koleva 2012; Klumbyté & Sharafudtinova 2013 [2012]; Kõresaar 2016; Kruszyński & Osiński 2016; see also the articles by Demski, Harlov-Csörtán, and Volkov in this issue).

<sup>7</sup> The annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in the early spring of 2014 in particular prompted NATO to take additional collective defence measures, including the deployment of multinational battle groups in the Baltic states and Poland.

- <sup>8</sup> In this context it is necessary to mention the Warsaw Pact signed in Warsaw in 1955. The Warsaw Pact, which formed a reaction to the integration of West Germany into NATO in 1955, was a political and military alliance of the states forming the Eastern Bloc, with the dominant role played by the USSR. The Pact was to function for thirty years, but in 1985 it was extended for another twenty years. It was declared disbanded as of July 1, 1991. Army headquarters of individual member states were subject to the Tenth Directorate of the General Staff of the USSR Armed Forces, performing the role of the General Staff of the United Armed Forces, with headquarters in Moscow (Sowa 2011: 208).
- <sup>9</sup> One crucial difference that derived from this fact was that like other male citizens of the USSR, men from the Baltic republics were obliged to serve in the Soviet Army.
- <sup>10</sup> While the withdrawal of foreign troops removed one obstacle from the Baltic states' path to NATO and the European Union, the Russian Federation has since developed a compatriot policy that both targets and instrumentalises Russian-speaking populations in the Baltics and beyond (Simonsen 2001; Conley & Gerber 2011). Even though it has not led to noticeable organised movements of Russophones in Latvia and Estonia, transnational cultural ties between Russian-speaking residents of these countries and Russia seem to have grown stronger in recent years (Kallas 2016 and references therein). The renewed individual and collective significance attached by Estonian and Latvian Russophones to Victory Day on May 9, marking the end of World War II, and its emergence as a vernacular holiday celebrated in public rather than within family circles, as was the case in the 1990s, can be seen as evidence of this emergent phenomenon (see Boldāne-Zeļenkova in this issue; Kaprāns & Seljamaa 2017, as well as other contributions to Gabowitsch & Gdaniec & Makhotina 2017).

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