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# The Past Is Not What It Used to Be: Contemporary Myths, Cold War Nostalgia and Abandoned Soviet Nuclear Bases

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*This article delves into the contemporary social perception of the three abandoned Soviet Cold War tactical nuclear bases in Poland, focusing on often overlooked phenomena in archaeological studies such as the contemporary myths (folk tales, contemporary legends, modern folklore, etc.) and nostalgia that have emerged around these sites. While contemporary myths and nostalgia are distinct phenomena with different outcomes, they share a common feature: a mythologized approach to the past. Established historical and archaeological narratives, derived from detailed studies, often coexist with alternative versions of the past inspired by folk imagination. This article aims to highlight their cultural value as an integral part of local identity, actively shaping the perception of material heritage. Contemporary myths offer insight into another layer of collective perception of the past, while nostalgia delves into the emotional aspects of human existence, coping with transience and searching for meaning.*

## Introduction

Material relics of modern conflicts have been the subject of archaeological studies for quite some time. Some prominent publications have been devoted to topics such as warfare, battlefields, fortifications and the impact of combat, artillery barrage and aerial bombardment on the landscape (e.g. Passmore *et al.* 2015; Tunwell *et al.* 2016; Waga & Fajer 2021). Others aim to highlight the material dimensions of the everyday experiences of soldiers and civilians faced with the harsh realities of war (Saunders 2010; Winter 2004; Zalewska & Kiarszys 2021). Scholars have also attempted to address the challenging material heritage of genocides, mass graves and prison camps (e.g. Brown 2005; Kobiałka *et al.* 2021; Saunders 2007; Sturdy Colls 2015; Uziel 2010).

Subjects discussed within conflict archaeology can be attributed to two main approaches (Zalewska & Kiarszys 2021, 1566). The first approach can be characterized as oriented towards the past, aiming to enrich factual knowledge, create new

archaeological narratives, enhance or criticize written historical sources and discover previously unknown evidence (e.g. Godziemba-Maliszewski 2010; Kiarszys 2024; Rak *et al.* 2016; Stele *et al.* 2021; Stoertz 2010). The latter approach focuses on exploring the present perception of the material heritage of conflicts and reflects on matters of commemoration. It seeks to understand the role of this troubled heritage in contemporary societies, sometimes engaging the local populace in various activities (Hall *et al.* 2010; Wilson 2013; Zalewska 2013).

This article will explore the second of the referred perspectives as it delves into the contemporary social perception of the three abandoned Soviet Cold War tactical nuclear bases in Poland. However, it will not discuss the subject of the material heritage itself, as it has been covered elsewhere (Kiarszys 2019a, 207–10, 219–24; 2019b). Instead, it will focus on phenomena in archaeological studies that are often quite specific to them but are usually omitted, such as the contemporary myths (folk tales, contemporary legends, modern folklore, etc.) and nostalgia that have emerged around those sites.

When considering myths, our tendency is often to attribute them to ancient or bygone cultures rather than modern societies. We see myths as an opposition to the modern Western mentality founded on scientific knowledge. Conversely, nostalgia is a prevalent aspect of contemporary mentality, integral to our identities and perception of the passage of time and the changes accompanying it. However, these two phenomena are closely intertwined. Essentially, nostalgia is built upon the myth of reliving the past. Moreover, in situations of lack of credible historical knowledge about certain sites, as is often the case with Cold War clandestine military installations, the existing gaps are usually filled by rumours, guesses and folk tales.

Established historical or archaeological narratives, derived from detailed studies, frequently coexist with alternative versions of the past inspired by the folk imagination. This article aims to highlight their cultural value as an important part of local identity, actively shaping the perception of the material heritage. The agency of contemporary myths should not be ignored, as they offer insight into yet another layer of collective perception of the past. According to A. González-Ruibal (2008), the role of material remains of conflicts can be studied through their entanglement with contemporary socio-cultural practices. This observation opens an interesting field of study, one that is, however, rarely explored by archaeologists. This lies on the verge of disciplines such as cultural anthropology, history, psychology, cultural studies and sociology, where contemporary myths and nostalgia are well-recognized subjects of research.

In the first part of this article, following a brief presentation of the historical background, I will discuss selected examples of contemporary myths collected during the research. The presented accounts are derived from interviews with local residents, supplemented by local newspaper articles from the 1990s that covered the topic of the nuclear sites. The second part is devoted to a discussion on nostalgia and is based on netnographical sources, primarily the posts from a military forum for the veterans of the Northern Group of Soviet Forces stationed in Poland.

### **Soviet tactical nuclear bases in Poland. Historical background**

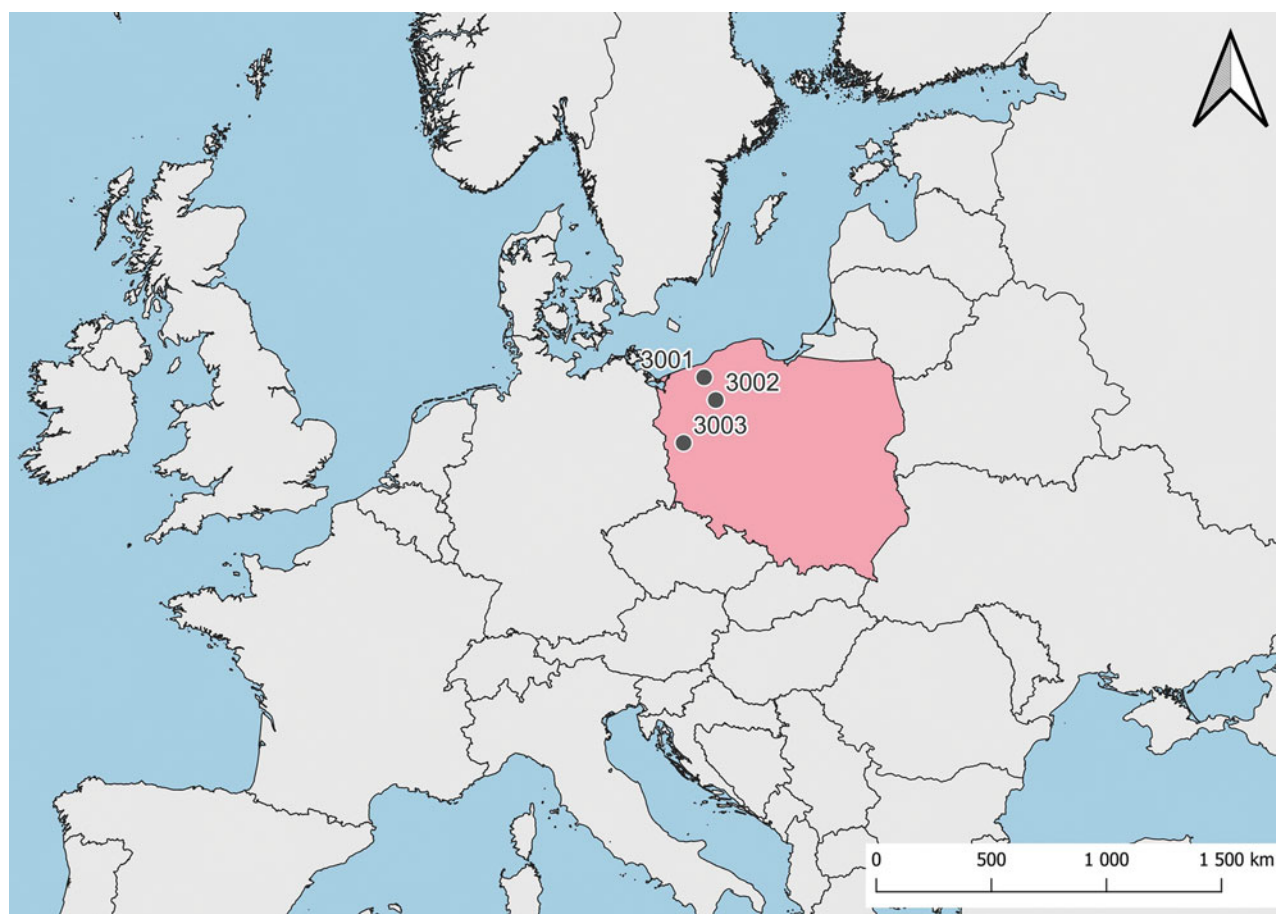
The results of archaeological studies on the nuclear warehouses in Poland that were covered by the code-name *Wisła* have been extensively detailed in earlier publications (e.g. Kiarszys 2019a,b). However, a brief

presentation of the historical background and the genesis of these facilities will be provided to offer adequate context for the topics discussed.

In February 1967, construction commenced on three Soviet tactical nuclear bases (IPN BU 1405/324 1966, 468–71): Object 3001 in Podborsko, Object 3002 in Brzeźnica Kolonia and Object 3003 in Templewo (IPN BU 1405/323 1966; IPN BU 1405/322 1967, 61–315; Kiarszys 2019b, 238–9). These facilities were located near areas supervised and heavily utilized by the Soviet army, situated on the peripheries of military training grounds and close to existing Soviet garrisons (Fig. 1). By December 1969, construction on all three sites was completed. The bases were specifically designed for the long-term storage of nuclear warheads and unguided nuclear aviation bombs, with no other weaponry such as nuclear carriers or missiles kept within the premises. This practice was established in the Soviet Union, where sole supervision of weapons of mass destruction belonged to the 12th Chief Directorate of the Ministry of Defence (12 GUMO). Importantly, this directorate operated independently of the General Staff and reported directly to the Minister of Defence. During peacetime, the Soviet forces maintained exclusive oversight of these bases. However, in the event of an armed conflict in Europe, the warheads were designated to be transferred to Polish missile units and military aviation.

After the Soviet Army took control of the *Wisła* facilities, they underwent a renaming process with new field post numbers. Object 3001 in Podborsko was designated as 01959, accompanied by the code-name *Купина* [bush], which likely alludes to the icon of 'Theotokos the Unburnt Bush', evoking imagery reminiscent of a nuclear explosion. Base 3002 in Brzeźnica-Kolonia was assigned the number 85918 and the name *Массив* [massif], likely indicating a large forest massif surrounding the facility. Object 3003 in Templewo was given the number 87648 and the codename *Волкодав* [wolfhound]. Those codenames and field post numbers mentioned in the accounts quoted below are not widely known, as they pertain to top-secret military garrisons. This information could only be possessed by individuals who served at those sites or had access to recently declassified documents (Kiarszys 2019a, 132).

All three nuclear bases were constructed according to uniform regulations and shared similar spatial organization, featuring identical buildings ordered into three main zones: (1) a technical area housing T-7 nuclear warehouses; (2) a barrack zone containing soldiers' quarters, a large mess hall with cinema, infirmary, warehouses and other ancillary structures;



**Figure 1.** *The locations of former Soviet tactical nuclear bases in Poland.*

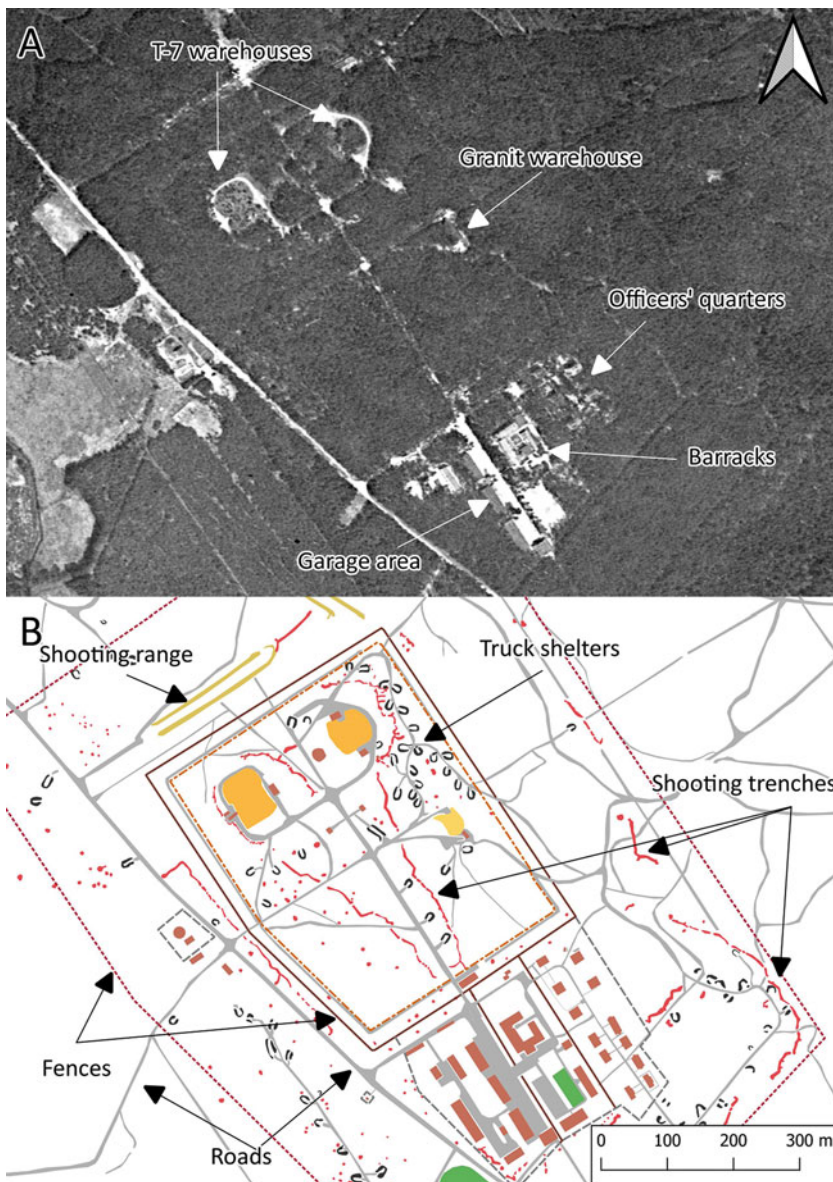
(3) a parking zone with garages (Fig. 2). Over the 22 years of operation, the facilities underwent further development. At each base, a new large Granit-type concrete warehouse was erected, alongside additional quarters, assembly halls, warehouses and expanded parking zones with new garages. The vicinity of the *Wista* facilities was fortified with an intricate system of fences, concealed shelters, trenches and strongpoints.

The *Wista* facilities were abandoned in October 1990 as Soviet troops initiated their withdrawal from Poland. Several years after their departure, the sites underwent demilitarization and were transferred to the Polish State Forests. Due to their remote locations and highly specialized nature, attempts to repurpose them for new military or civilian use proved unfeasible and costly. Among the three nuclear facilities mentioned, only Object 3001 in Podborsko remains relatively intact (Fig. 3). The other two underwent near-total demolition (Kierszys 2019a, 207–11). What remains today are the most resilient structures, notably two T-7-type

reinforced concrete warehouses, alongside other durable structures, roads, field fortifications and numerous small artefacts.

### Contemporary myths, folk tales and urban legends

Contemporary myths are also characterized in the literature as folk tales, modern or contemporary legends, rumours, urban legends, and more (DiFonzo & Bordia 2007, 19; Wójcicka 2013, 44–5). It is a specific genre of present-day folklore. Described as short narratives of unusual events, contemporary myths influence the collective imagination and reflect shared social values, attitudes, worldviews and emotions, but also fears and anxieties (Donovan 2015, 788). They often exploit tropes of supernatural, magical and unsettling phenomena. According to J. Brunvand (1981, 10; 2012), contemporary myths consist of three main features: a persuasive and intriguing story, a foundation in collective beliefs, and significant messages or morals. These short narratives, although unreal, are anchored



**Figure 2.** Object 3002 at Brzeźnica Kolonia. (A) Declassified satellite image from the HEXAGON programme, acquired on 16 May 1979 (United States Geological Survey); (B) The final phase of use of Object 3002. The plan is based on the analysis of aerial photographs and airborne LiDAR scanning. (Head Office of Geodesy and Cartography of Poland.)

in true events and places as a means of authentication (Tribunal 2015, 30). Some scholars distinguish between sub-genres of urban legends and folk tales. Urban legends typically emerge and circulate in an urban environment, presenting earthly events inspired by real-life observations. Folk tales, on the contrary, contain stories with magical inclusions of supernatural creatures or describe travels to upside-down or parallel worlds (Wójcicka 2013, 55–6). This distinction is significant, as the cases of contemporary myths discussed in the following paragraphs clearly contain elements of both sub-genres.

Contemporary myths share similar structures and elements. These simple, single-thread narratives typically consist of two parts. The first part serves as

an introduction and presents a specific situation with a surprising, and often thrilling ending, while the second part reveals the alleged cause of observed events (DiFonzo & Bordia 2007, 30). More frequently, the resolution of the plot refers to common knowledge rather than magical factors or established scientific facts. However, in some cases, the narrative exploits pseudo-scientific or poorly understood arguments under a false pretence of rationality. Contemporary myths have a tendency to exaggerate certain aspects of reality—for example, the dimensions of underground structures, emphasizing bizarre elements of sites where the story took place, or overstating the influence of certain factors or physical processes, among others. Folk tales also have a pragmatic aspect



**Figure 3.** *Cold War Museum, Object 3001 at Podborsko (present day). (A) T-7 warehouse; (B) Granit building.*

as they address vital problems and dangers concerning society at the given moment (Wójcicka 2013, 44). Thus, the accounts analysed in this paper frequently mention tropes such as health problems purportedly caused by radiation, fears regarding weapons of mass destruction and concerns about environmental pollution. The primary source of the story usually remains unknown; however, in some instances, newspaper articles or other media are cited as the basis of the conveyed tales. As will be presented in the further part of this paper, many newspaper articles repeat various versions of folk tales, contributing to their widespread dissemination and validation.

The contemporary myths analysed below are summarized from collected testimonies and not

presented as literal citations. This approach was taken to conserve space in this article, as some accounts repeated slightly different versions of the same narratives. Similarly, the content of newspaper articles is referenced in a condensed manner for the same reason. The Polish titles of the articles were translated into English.

### **Underground structures, greedy scavengers and potatoes: the *Wisła* nuclear facilities and the gates to the upside-down world**

Soon after the Soviet troops withdrew from the *Wisła* nuclear bases, mentions of them began to surface in the mass media. The revelation of the former presence



**Figure 4.** Archival photographs of the residential zone at Object 3001 (Podborsko) during the 1980s. (A) Officers' quarters; (B) Group photograph of soldiers with barracks in the background. A similar architectural design was used in Poland for schools. (Photographs from the collection of M. Żuk.)

of nuclear weapons within Polish territories was no longer a secret, triggering intense public debate and capturing the imagination of the populace.

The phenomenon of creating folk legends regarding Cold War military bases extends beyond the *Wista* facilities. It is a widespread cultural practice observed in the vicinity of many other former military garrisons in Poland. The exploration of memory, oral history and contemporary myths related to the presence of the Soviet army and its activities has attracted significant interest and attention in ethnographic studies (e.g. Burszta & Grębecka 2015; Grębecka 2017a,b; Kondusza 2006; 2009; 2018).

Some of the folk tales connected with the *Wista* nuclear bases may unexpectedly stem from the

feelings of disappointment experienced by the first illegal explorers, who entered them soon after the unexpected withdrawal of Soviet troops. These pioneers were met with a stark realization: the long-anticipated marvels they had envisioned were nowhere to be found. Instead of the awaited monumental underground structures and deep missile silos, the explorers were met with mundane sights. The housing estates for officers' families lacked grandeur, featuring architecture indistinguishable from modernistic blocks of flats commonly found in Polish towns and villages (Fig. 4). Buildings of headquarters, barracks, warehouses and garages were adapted from the standard civilian architectural design. The only structures that stood out, albeit



**Figure 5.** Inside the ruins of abandoned nuclear bases (present day). (A) The main hall of the T-7 warehouse at Object 3003 in Templewo; (B) Ruined Granit warehouse at Object 3002 in Brzeźnica-Kolonia.

modestly, were the large T-7 concrete warehouses, partially submerged into the ground, built to store nuclear warheads and the Granit-type buildings (Fig. 5A, B). Although far from the foretold monumental underground halls, these buildings were unique enough to pique interest and curiosity.

Most likely such a situation contributed to the popular myth that the true nuclear installations remained undiscovered, either buried underground or located elsewhere. According to this belief, the *Wisła* facilities were merely ineptly constructed dummies designed to deceive enemy intelligence (Resident of Tychowo, 2018). In another version of the myth, the purpose of these facilities is perceived as more messianic and sacrificial. There is a shared

opinion that they were intended to draw NATO's retaliatory nuclear strike onto Poland, thereby safeguarding the Soviet Union and other allied countries of the Eastern Bloc.

Although likely developed independently in distant locations, some myths bear a striking resemblance due to shared cultural codes and conventions throughout society. Folk tales often intertwine motifs of water and hidden underground structures (Resident of Dobrowo, 2018; Resident of Templewo, 2018). In both the Podborsko and Templewo regions, there is a strong conviction that just before the withdrawal of Soviet troops, the waters of nearby lakes rapidly receded and the swamps dried up. Several alternative reasons have been proposed for these

'observations'. One explanation suggests that departing soldiers flooded large ICBM silos with live and armed missiles, which purportedly remain underground awaiting a signal to launch. In another version, the observation is attributed to the flooding of a sophisticated system of underground tunnels. Some accounts also mention shafts connecting Object 3003 with nearby pre-WWII German fortifications of the Międzyrzecz Fortification Region (Resident of Wielowieś, 2018). Similarly, in the Brzeźnica-Kolonia region, there is a tale of an underground route leading from Object 3002 to the Soviet garrison in Borne Sulinowo, several dozen kilometres away (Resident of Budy, 2018).

The folk legends regarding large underground structures exist in various contexts related to the Soviet military presence and the communist regime. They serve as analogues of the religious image of the world order, where what is above ground belongs to the known and fair reality, operating according to logical and predictable laws, while the sinister and wretched world is hidden below the surface. In the ludic imagination, Soviet generals and communist party *apparatchiks* are depicted as the dark rulers of these underground upside-down realms, where they concealed evidence of their heinous crimes, hoarded wealth, and tortured innocent prisoners. Similar stories are recounted e.g. by inhabitants of Legnica—a prominent Soviet garrison in western Poland—where a second city was allegedly constructed underground, complete with large barracks, a railway station and even a military airfield (Burszta & Grębecka 2015, 19–20).

Folk tales sometimes feature a baffling plot centred around inexplicable events with a sinister moral ending. The structure of such short forms bears a disturbing resemblance to medieval exempla or morality plays. One commonly mythologized issue concerns radioactive contamination and its purported influence on the health of local residents. Radioactivity is often portrayed as a deceptive and lethal force that transcends the known limits of the laws of physics. For instance, a folk tale from the region of Podborsko recounts the tragic fate of a 'greedy scavenger' who profited from trading in materials stolen from the abandoned nuclear Object 3001 (Resident of Dobrowo, 2018). This dark figure, surrounded by an aura of evil, conducted his theft primarily under cover of darkness. By day, he and his relatives lived extravagantly, spending their ill-gotten gains on feasting and luxury. However, their prosperity came to a sudden end when the 'greedy scavenger' unknowingly collected radioactive materials, mistaking them for ordinary scrap metals. This mistake resulted in severe and long-lasting

illness, ultimately leading to his slow and painful demise. In some versions of the tale, the culprit's family also suffered a similar fate as punishment for their greed and immodesty. During the 2019 survey, all three *Wista* bases were examined using a licensed Geiger counter, with no evidence of radioactive pollution detected. Natural background radiation was very low and varied from 0.08  $\mu\text{Sv/h}$  to 0.345  $\mu\text{Sv/h}$  (Kiarszys 2019a, 166–7).

Folk tales found their way into local newspapers, where they were indiscriminately repeated, contributing to their widespread dissemination. Articles published in the 1990s frequently featured a mix of flamboyant products of ludic imagination and credible, detailed information about post-Soviet nuclear garrisons. Some of those accounts are closer to rumours or hearsay, lacking a cohesive plot and other typical elements of folk tales.

The *Super Express* tabloid newspaper article from 12 April 1996, entitled 'Where nuclear weapons were: Colonel Myshkin's potatoes' (Różycki 1996), presents a vivid portrayal of one of the *Wista* facilities. The article describes a quadruple fence surrounding the base, with barbed wire under high voltage, trenches, tank shelters, and machine-gun strongpoints activated automatically with a photocell, 'all to protect the nuclear weapons'. The article mentions a Polish engineer named Niemiec who allegedly often drank vodka with Colonel Myshkin, the deputy commander of the base. When questioned about the contents of the concrete warehouses, Colonel Myshkin humorously referred to them as potato storage, a euphemism sometimes used by Soviets for nuclear warheads, also referred to as apples. The content of the article alternates between unbelievable information and stories that seem credible. For example, local residents mentioned flourishing trade with Soviet officers and their wives, a typical aspect of social interactions between locals and Soviets, especially in the 1980s. However, the less credible part of the article refers to an underground labyrinth, corridors and shooting domes, an automatic security system activated by photocells and tanks that were never there. The author of the article also describes experiencing a 'strange sweet taste in the mouth caused by radiation', though he also adds briefly, that such contamination was not confirmed by a specialized military unit that conducted measurements within the base. It might surprise readers to find that so many known tropes from ludic narratives regarding the *Wista* facilities were repeated in this single article.

In an article from the local paper *Panorama Pilska* titled 'Around the Bunker' (Szalbierz 1994),



an anonymous Polish conscript soldier who guarded facility 3002 after the departure of Soviet troops recounted his experiences. He mentioned the existence of underground tunnels through which guards could move out to a distance of several hundred metres. Additionally, the officers, who rarely visited the base, instructed the soldiers not to eat or touch anything in the forest, warning them that their hair would fall out in 10 years. The article also features accounts from residents of Brzeźnica-Kolonia, who mentioned engaging in small-scale trade with Soviet officers, exchanging food products, alcohol, tobacco and meat. They regretfully recall the ending of the old times, emphasizing the peaceful relations and honesty of the citizens of the Soviet garrison. The nostalgia for the declining communist state can be understood fully only within the context of the 1990s, a period marked in Poland by the economic crisis, poverty and high unemployment rates, particularly severe in rural and under-developed regions. Despite fears of radioactive contamination, residents deny its presence, pointing to their own and their children's good health.

The article from the *DW-magazyn* newspaper entitled 'Nuclear Warheads 150 Kilometres from Bydgoszcz' (Ostropolska 1994) describes the clandestine military facility near Sypniewo, which was said to be surrounded by seven fences, some under high voltage. According to the author, Soviet guards with dogs patrolled the area, while other soldiers were stationed in watchtowers, dugouts and trenches, prepared to defend the base (Fig. 6). It is noteworthy that some narratives, possibly influenced by historical films, liken the *Wisła* facilities to WWII German concentration camps. This unconscious use of ready-made conventions from mass culture is quite common. According to the article, the warehouses contained live missiles ready to be launched at any moment, with transporter-erector-launcher (TEL) parked in the Granit shelter. The folk imagination efficiently fills the empty spaces of the deserted nuclear bases. In fact, there were no missiles stored within those bases, nor TELs, as those were stockpiled elsewhere and required different infrastructure. In other articles, the motif of guard dogs tied on long chains and fences under high voltage is frequently reiterated. The warehouses were purportedly guarded by sharpshooters or Spetsnaz special forces patrols. Additionally, sharpened metal poles were strategically positioned in the surrounding areas, forming a lethal trap for enemy paratroopers (e.g. Szymanik & Wizowska 2019, 51). However, there are no historical or military proofs to confirm those claims.

In the article 'The Church takes nuclear bunkers' (Terlecki 1991) published in *Nowy Tygodnik* on 4 December 1991, it was reported that Soviet soldiers quietly left the base in October 1990, under the cover of darkness. Prior to their departure, they sold various household items such as washing machines, refrigerators, colour TVs, vacuum cleaners and pots to local residents at discounted prices. The article mentioned the presence of three gigantic underground silos in the 'third zone', specifically two military bunkers of the T-7 type and the third, known as Granit. However, none of these structures has a silo construction; rather, they are horizontal structures only partially submerged into the ground. The article also debunked rumours of radioactive contamination, stating that measurements carried out by specialists from the National Atomic Energy Agency did not confirm such claims.

The conventions of thinking about the past have profound implications. In many action films, the countdown to a nuclear strike is preceded by dramatic sequences featuring the opening of silo doors. Consequently, visitors to nuclear bases in Poland expect to encounter similar structures, and their absence can lead to disbelief and disappointment. Legends surrounding *Wisła* facilities often blend memories with conjectures and 'ready-made' images perpetuated by mass culture. This frequent phenomenon of amalgamating memories with tropes borrowed from literature and film has been observed by social psychologist Harald Welzer (cited in Grębecka 2017a, 134; Saryusz-Wolska 2009, 30–31). This practice extends beyond incorporating single episodes into narratives and often forms the basis for constructing entire stories.

### Nostalgia and the Cold War

Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw (Chase & Shaw 1989) have identified three pivotal conditions for the emergence of nostalgia: first, a historical awareness rooted in a linear concept of time; second, a shared societal perception of crisis and inadequacy in the present; and third, the presence of tangible, material remnants from the past (Burszta 1997, 124–5; Krajewski 2003, 207–8). Among these factors, the latter holds the utmost significance from an archaeological standpoint, defining the crucial role played by artefacts, ruins and historical sites in the collective memory. The materialized past prevails, lending an assurance to the veracity of remembered events.

Nostalgia often intensifies following periods of societal or political upheaval, introducing new and



**Figure 6.** *The nuclear facilities of Wisła were well fortified, with trenches, bunkers and concealed observation posts. Some relics of those fortifications survive to the present.*

confounding rules alongside an uncertain future, evoking feelings of dislocation, absence and loss. It becomes a psychological response to these changes, often taking on an escapist nature (Lowenthal 2015, 16, 41; Pawleta 2016, 70–74). Seeking solace in what appears unchanging—the past—partially alleviates resulting anxieties. The past frequently assumes a semblance of being better, safer, more orderly and more rational (Burszta 1997, 127–8). As Lowenthal (2015, 15) aptly puts it, ‘Nostalgia transcends yearnings for lost childhoods and scenes of early life, embracing imagined pasts never experienced’. One prominent example of nostalgic yearnings is the phenomenon of ‘Ostalgie’ in Germany, with similar

phenomena emerging in other countries of the former Eastern Bloc (Godeanu-Kenworthy 2011).

Nostalgia intertwines very personal experiences. It evokes emotions while employing selective memory (Krajewski 2003, 207), mythologizing events and distilling their essence. All events hold equal value on a ‘timeless plane’ (Burszta 1997, 123), creating idealized images that freeze time. In this context, nostalgia is more about feelings than about historical accuracy. It is the inherently impossible promise that ‘the past will return as an aesthetic echo and an aura’ once experienced (Zaleski 2004, 12). However, the reality mythologized by nostalgia is notably distinct from the folk tales and contemporary myths

discussed in the earlier parts of this paper. Additionally, they serve different purposes.

Photographs and accounts shared by former soldiers from the *Wista* facilities also encapsulate nostalgia. While predominantly focusing on positive experiences and emotions, these memories also touch upon negative aspects, albeit softened and accepted to some extent. They illuminate the monotony of service, where any deviations from routine are perceived as noteworthy. Alongside mundane details of military nuclear garrison life, these recollections ponder time's passage, transience and significance.

As articulated by Burszta (1997, 125), 'by revisiting my memories, I can gain insight into my present self and enrich my current existence'. Those who are valiant enough to confront their memories may venture to revisit places from their past, but encounter realities that are often different from the expectations. The remnants of the Cold War, such as post-Soviet nuclear bases, epitomize an era governed by starkly different norms, now seemingly distant due to profound socio-political shifts in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

### **Happiness for everybody, free, and nobody will go away unsatisfied!**

The title of this paragraph was inspired by *Roadside Picnic*, a science-fiction novel by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky (2012). It echoes the last wish of the main character in the novel, Rederick, when confronted with the wish-granting artefact known as the 'Golden Sphere'. In a certain sense, nostalgia can be seen as a similar deceitful wish-granting phenomenon, a promise of impossible time travel, as 'we all seek to profit from the past while avoiding its trammels' (Lowenthal 2015, 16, 63–4).

Most of the accounts presented below originate from an open military forum gathering veterans of the Northern Group of Soviet Forces stationed in Poland. The forum was quite active until the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, declining afterwards. With changes in the global political situation, perspectives on the recent past were redefined. Therefore, the opinions and sentiments expressed in the accounts below refer to the situation preceding the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is important to keep in mind that some posts were written by veterans now residing in independent republics, who can openly express their thoughts due to freedom of speech. Others, mostly from Russian citizens, were sometimes anonymized by their authors or were very cautious in sharing details. Posts usually

include information about years of service, military post, rank and the field postal number of the unit, allowing for identification of accounts regarding the *Wista* facilities. It is worth mentioning that, while large Soviet garrisons sparked intensive discussions with numerous participants, the *Wista* nuclear facilities drew relatively little interest, resulting in modest content and only a few pages of posts.

The cited accounts were translated into English by the author of this paper. Parts of the posts that did not pertain to the topic of this paper were removed. There is no certain way to determine which of the authors served in the *Wista* facilities and which just claim to have done so. However, in the posts analysed below, some small details appear that could only be known by individuals who were present in the bases during their operation. They often refer to events such as years of construction of new buildings, weaponry used, description of specific facilities, accidents, military exercises and their codenames, among other details. Some of these facts can be confirmed today by declassified documents or satellite imagery.

In written accounts, details like years of service, field post number, subunit affiliation and the role performed are commonly shared as a way of introduction. Personal information, including one's full name, is less frequently provided. Specific details about used equipment and barracks layout are often included to authenticate the account, resonating with those who served there. Accompanying these memories are surreptitiously taken photographs shared online, providing tangible proof of the author's claimed presence at the location. In most of the eyewitness accounts the nuclear zone's appearance remains elusive, as it was inaccessible to common soldiers.

Military unit 01959 stationed in Dobrowo [Object 3001] held a modest population, with approximately 500 occupants including officers' children, 130 soldiers and non-commissioned officers, three transport batteries, an independent motorized infantry battalion, and a supply unit. Although I frequented the technical area, I never gained access to the warehouses. Upon my arrival at the 'sanatorium', as referred to by officers from Białogard, I encountered aviation officers, while hearsay suggested the presence of sailors earlier on. However, by the close of 1978, everyone was donning the uniforms of artillery and missile troops. Unfortunately, contemporary satellite imagery reveals partial demolition of the garrison. It was a nice place to reside, the garrison was like candy, especially after the commissioning of the boiler room, bathhouse, laundry, and the construction of a new concrete warehouse in the restricted zone.



**Figure 7.** *The interiors of the T-7 warehouse at the Museum of the Cold War, Object 3001 at Podborsko.*

(Vyacheslav Slepov, 2011 [served in Object 3001 from 1978 to 1980])

The mention of the unit being nicknamed ‘sanatorium’ holds significance, recognized by other individuals who served at Object 3001. Soviet military garrisons usually possessed informal names known among soldiers. The population count and variety of subunits are credible and provide insight into the base’s structure and primary function. Memories evoke forbidden spaces within a mysterious technical zone and the enigmatic nuclear-warhead warehouses therein. According to staff from the Cold War Museum at Podborsko, on a few occasions, after a guided tour, foreign visitors

admitted that they were veterans of the Soviet army and had served in the facility. However, this tour was the first time they were allowed into the T-7 warehouse (Fig. 7).

The mention of different military uniforms encountered in Object 3001 is an interesting remark. In order to maintain counterintelligence measures and conceal the actual function of the nuclear military bases, specific uniforms were adopted at each site. From the end of the 1970s at Object 3001, missile and artillery uniforms were worn, while armoured-forces uniforms were utilized at Object 3002, and air-force uniforms were the norm at Object 3003. This uniform selection aimed to create a deceptive facade and prevent easy identification of the true nature of

the facilities. The type of uniforms used within the premises did not have any factual significance, as the bases were directly subordinated to 12 GUMO and not the Army.

Visiting the site today for a trip down memory lane is implausible as time has elapsed, and the garrison lies tucked away in a remote corner of the world. However, advancements in modern technology grant access to Google Earth's satellite imagery, offering a surrogate means of visiting the site. Observing the former base through the lens of a satellite allows for the recognition of some locations, yet the visual does not align with expectations. The recent partial demolition of the former military base signifies the erasure of a fragment of the author's past. Mundane additions such as the construction completion of a drying room, a laundry and a steam bath likely marked significant events in the garrison's life. The author incidentally mentions the construction of a new concrete warehouse during his tenure from 1978 to 1980, coinciding with the actual construction of the Granit building within the technical zone. Only those who served there at the time could know that detail. This fact was not recorded in any of the available historical sources and could only be verified recently with the declassification of the HEXAGON satellite imagery collected during those years (Fig. 8A, B).

It would be very interesting for me to see what the barracks, headquarters, canteen, parade ground, and sports fields look like now. I have never been inside the nuclear warehouses, the officers did not let us in there. Regarding relations—now in Russia, everyone is a pseudo-historian and pours out a lot of trash on the past. Yes, things have been different, and not only good things happened; people have always had differences. Some like to depict only negative moments today, while others, on the contrary, paint everything in rosy colours. I believe that the truth lies in the middle. There is no point in going to extremes; if there are any doubts, we can always discuss them calmly. I remember that somewhere near the unit, we were once shown a monument to fallen Soviet soldiers from the Second World War, well-kept with flowers. We talked a little with the Poles then—there was no hostility, and the 'fathers commanders' didn't tell us anything bad about the ally. (Viktor Kosenkov, 2011 [served in facility 3001 1981–1982])

The nostalgic desire to revisit one's youth stems from an unspoken hope of reliving past experiences (Lowenthal 2015, 16). The images fixed in the memory are mythologized, and timeless. The author wishes to revisit these places, seeking the ultimate

confirmation that the memories held are not mere dreams, but accurate depictions of true events.

Understanding the past becomes challenging as various conflicting perspectives emerge. The collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in a new socio-political reality with a fundamentally different approach to recent history. Narratives, symbols and tropes once valued were redefined or rejected. The world lost its familiar order, and the new one had not yet been established, contributing to a shared societal perception of crisis and deficiency in the present and the longing for 'the good old days'.

The author of the account attempts to argue that his individual experiences were positive, suggesting that the past was better than the tumultuous present characterized by a cacophony of voices. Nostalgia, in this context, involves selective memories that create idealized images of the past, aiming to evoke desired emotions. The statement 'There was no hostility' reflects the author's current sentiment, at least at that particular moment in 2011. Would it be expressed differently today?

The following account is relatively lengthy and somewhat disordered as it comprises several consecutively sent posts. It contains numerous intriguing details about nostalgia, everyday life, military exercises and the general conditions during the declining communist period.

I served there [at the military facility 3003 in Templewo] from 1985 to 1987 in the communications subunit. I was an operator of long-range communications equipment, carrying spools of wires on my back and radios. When we exercised the 'war' [the codename for regular exercises of the defence against an enemy assault], all subunits were divided into four groups, and each group went to its indicated deployment area, performing assigned tasks. One of the communications squads would then go to the top of the nearby hill to maintain communication with Moscow. There was also a backup command post. Not far from the headquarters, specifically between the headquarters and the wooden houses of the NCOs, there was a small underground command post. One time, I spent the whole day in it until the end of the exercises. It was damp and cold there even in summer. (...)

We had two types of alerts: 'Storm' and 'Hurricane'. If I'm not mistaken, during 'Storm' exercises, we practised guarding the garrison, while 'Hurricane' meant an urgent assembly and departure to deployment areas, signifying the commencement of war. One formation headed towards the Soyuz, evacuating officers' and NCOs' children and wives. The communications team and support unit, consisting of no more than 20 people, remained at the base.

In 1986, conditions were challenging. Electricity was often cut off, and food deliveries were sabotaged. We



**Figure 8.** Declassified satellite imagery from the HEXAGON programme. (A) Newly constructed Granit warehouse at Object 3001, acquired on 16 August 1979; (B) Granit warehouse at Object 3002, acquired on 16 May 1979. Trucks and cars were frequently recorded by CIA spy satellites: (C) the parking lot in Object 3001, acquired on 16 August 1979. White arrows indicate vehicles, blue arrows point to camouflage netting; (D) vehicles visible at the parking lot in Object 3003, acquired on 1 June 1982. (United States Geological Survey.)

resorted to eating canned groats and bread wrapped in plastic. The bread, preserved with spirit and notably black, was a particular favourite (...). Money from our families was given to the supply personnel, who exchanged it for *zlotys* [Polish currency] and brought us sunglasses, jewellery, jeans trousers, and electronic watches (...).

During hostile Sputnik overflights, life at the base came to a standstill. Vehicles were concealed, and after the Sputniks passed, everything returned to normal. Life at the base, located in the forest, was ordinary. We were not allowed to go outside the base (...).

There was an idiot who once took it upon himself to make up a map illustrating the global hotspots, with flashing lights indicating where and when the United States, perceived as the aggressor, posed a threat. His

artistic activities inadvertently resulted in a fire that engulfed the barracks of the guard company (...). Unfortunately, the barracks, along with all its equipment, succumbed to the flames. (...)

The garrison was small, and more than a quarter of a century had passed, (...) they had already razed the base to the ground. There was not even a mention of my service in my passport [military card]. However, there were stamps of the KGB and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, although the time of service was officially counted. Each of us could later wear any emblem we liked. They brought us a basket and told us to choose any emblem we wanted. (...)

Why am I sharing this? I wish to convey it to future generations. Perhaps, after 20 years, there will be no remaining witnesses to the flamboyant history of

Volkodar. I must apologize, but my name and surname are fictitious. However, everything else is factual, including the years of service and the details of my unit. Those familiar with the history will understand why... (Ivan Smirnov, 2015 [served in facility 3003 1985–1987])

The recollection of events from the past often meanders randomly and lacks order. Over time, the most vividly imprinted memories are those that seemed the most unexpected and unusual. Garrison life was entrenched in routine, marked by exercises and sudden alarms that necessitated spending prolonged hours in shelters or trenches guarding the outskirts of the base. The precise location of the backup command and control centre serves as an authentication detail known only to those who served at the site, adding credibility to the account. During the 2019 archaeological survey, the backup post mentioned in the quoted account was located due to this description with the aid of remote sensing techniques.

The reality of the late 1980s crisis included power outages and food shortages, marked by the taste of canned bread preserved with alcohol and malfunctioning military equipment. Memories of smuggled Western ‘luxuries’ like electronic watches, sunglasses and jeans intertwine with the fear of the war that never came and the ‘Hurricane’ exercises.

Ritualized military practices, such as daily assemblies, drills and alarms, also included countermeasures against enemy satellite reconnaissance and the camouflaging of equipment. The Soviets had measures in place to track and predict accurately the flight paths of spy satellites (CIA *n.d.*; Fowler 2010). This knowledge could be leveraged to protect military facilities effectively. However, the ‘ritual’ of regularly camouflaging equipment also highlights its universal use as a method for maintaining constant readiness. Notably, there are numerous examples of satellite imagery from the era capturing various activities within the *Wista* nuclear bases, including military exercises, and the relocation of a large number of vehicles (Fig. 8C, D).

A military card bereft of accurate information about completed service feels like a deprivation of one’s identity, a denial of two years of one’s life. The author regrets that the base was demolished. There are no longer tangible proofs to confirm his statement, leaving the veracity of remembered events uncertain. The link with his youth was severed, an irrevocable loss.

A vivid memory is that of the wooden barracks set ablaze by a faulty illuminated world map, a momentary break from the monotony of dull garrison life. In conclusion, the author requests remembrance. *Volkodar* – Wolfhound, one more codename

for clandestine Object 3003, adds another layer of authenticity known to only a few.

I visited Site 3003 in 2013. There is a forest covering the area, and no signs of our base remain. It is astonishing. I spent a considerable time searching for the garrison in the forest until I encountered Polish forest rangers who guided me to the location where the base used to be. (Valeriy Strybak, 2005 [served in facility 3003 1981–85])

The landscapes preserved in memory remain unchanging and resistant to the ravages of time. Today, a forest covers the area where the nuclear base once stood. The gate leading to the past could not be found. In the end, contrary to what nostalgia promised, every traveller down memory lane is destined to leave unsatisfied (Fig. 9).

### The thing that has a history in it

The evolving social perception of the past gradually changes. New myths emerge as society becomes fascinated or threatened by new factors, whether real or imagined. As an example, we may examine the following account from a Polish soldier who served at Podborsko several years after the withdrawal of the Soviet army. This unique narrative reflects on the ever-changing perspective of the past and the significance of its material relics, which once seemed irrelevant but have gained significant value over time and become ‘the things with the history’.

I served in the base 3001 from 1996 to 2001. Initially, I served as a guard, later progressing to the role of guard commander. Out of simple curiosity, we explored abandoned buildings to observe the interiors. In 1998, the single-story NCOs’ houses were demolished, despite some being in good condition with intact windows, doors, and installations. Occasionally, we entered the T-7 warehouses. I remember that the kindergarten building retained cots, books, and paintings of fairy-tale characters like a wolf and a hare on the walls.

Back then, we paid little attention to these remnants, considering them old and obsolete. However, reflecting on it now, even a simple bowl or plate would be of interest. Various items, including epaulettes, old uniforms, children’s toys, and shoes, were scattered around. The infirmary housed rooms for sick children adorned with paintings on the walls. Sports facilities, including a soccer field, training grounds, and a basketball court, were in good condition (...).

The military service at Object 3001 was monotonous and challenging. The base was situated in the middle of a large forest with limited entertainment for young soldiers. The railway station was 3 kilometres away, the sole means of transportation. A village shop provided essentials. As a form of entertainment, we



**Figure 9.** Object 3003 in aerial photography from 12 August 1996, shortly before demolition (A); and contemporary aerial photograph of the same area (B). (Head Office of Geodesy and Cartography of Poland.)

occasionally pursued blueberry pickers from the nearby villages. They would dismantle fences and cut netting to access the berries within the forested part of the base. We caught and released them soon after, only for them to return the next day. In the middle of the 1990s, nearby state farms went bankrupt due to the economic crisis, prompting families to collect forest products and sell them by the main road. (Artur Kaszukur, 2018 [guard commander at facility 3001 in Podborsko 1996–2001])

The account provides a unique perspective, seamlessly blending the past and present of the nuclear warehouses. Boredom and curiosity drive individuals to explore abandoned buildings, discovering their former functions. The contrast between pictures from children's fairy tales in the kindergarten and the

empty spaces of the nuclear facility adds depth to these memories. Embedded in this recollection is the contextual backdrop of the 1990s, marked by high unemployment, bankrupt state farms, and the regular intrusion of berry pickers into the unit's premises. The reflection extends to how our perception of material traces from the past evolves over the years. Everyday items left in abandoned rooms, once deemed irrelevant, now hold significant historical and material value (Fig. 10).

This aligns well with the themes explored by the American science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick ([1962] 1982) in his renowned novel *The Man in the High Castle*. In the novel, Dick delves into the coexistence of multiple versions of the past, raising the persistent





**Figure 10.** *Cold War artefacts scattered in the forests surrounding Object 3003.*

question: is there an identifiable authentic version of reality, or is it lost amidst its distorted representations? In the alternative reality depicted in the novel, where the Allies lost World War II and the United States of America is under occupation by the Third Reich and the Japanese Empire, a peculiar cultural phenomenon emerged within the upper class of Japanese descent. It stems from a shared sense of longing and nostalgia for recently eradicated, yet now revered, products of American mass culture and history. Items that were once widely available and often perceived as tacky became, in the novel, unique valuables. These tangible remnants of a fading world are now coveted as collectable memorabilia, fossilized pieces of mythologized

past. Possession of such artefacts significantly elevates the prestige of their owners, symbolizing a manifestation of refined taste. These artefacts are believed to possess an unspecified energy capable of evoking memories and eliciting strong emotions. The parallels here with the European aristocracy during the colonial period, avidly collecting souvenirs from conquered territories, are hard to overlook. In a certain sense, the contemporary approach to the past is also inherently colonial. These traditions endure in archaeology, often sidestepping challenging and disconcerting subjects while exploiting the past for captivating and appealing content.

The reality depicted in the novel spawns a thriving antique market and numerous semi-legal

workshops that meticulously craft ‘certified’ replicas of historical weaponry, jewellery and other types of souvenirs to fulfil the market’s demand. Wyndam-Matson, a secondary character, owns one such enterprise, dealing in ‘fake antiques’. On one occasion, he presents his friend Rita with two Zippo lighters: one allegedly belonging to Franklin D. Roosevelt, the last president of the USA, and the other, its faithful replica. Following the presentation, Wyndam-Matson asked Rita to discern between the two. However, there was no ‘magical aura’ or ‘mystical plasmatic presence’ that distinguished the authentic item. Wyndam-Matson concluded that the value of the ‘thing that has a history in it’ is defined solely within our pre-existing knowledge and assumptions. It is abstract, conventional, and does not objectively exist beyond culture and memory. Although it is hard to admit it, the meaning of the past is continuously redefined, mythologized and negotiated, much like any other symbolic convention of human culture, and the past itself is something that happens to us only in the present.

You see my point. It’s all a big racket; they’re playing it on themselves. I mean, a gun goes through a famous battle, like the Meuse-Argonne, and it’s the same as if it hadn’t, unless you know. It’s in here.—He tapped his head—In the mind, not the gun. (Dick [1962] 1982, 31)

## Conclusions

Artefacts and places from the past often become objects of the collective imagination, filled with various narratives and suppositions. In addition to the official academic version of history, contemporary myths, rumours and other ludic phenomena circulate, rooted in shared beliefs rather than scientific opinions. In some instances, the emergence of contemporary myths significantly predates the granting of material heritage status, as was the case with the *Wisła* facilities. Thus, folk interest can be yet another factor indicating growing common attention to certain places from the past before academic scholars take notice of their rising cultural value.

As indicated in this paper, contemporary myths and nostalgia are slightly different phenomena with dissimilar outcomes. However, they share a common feature: a mythologized approach to the past. Importantly, from an archaeological standpoint, they are anchored in a real place and a specified time, which highlights their ties with the material world, making them an interesting source contextualizing social perception of material heritage. Contemporary myths aim to express meaningful problems

concerning society at a given moment, attempting to fill knowledge gaps with ready-made images from the collective imagination. Nostalgia, on the other hand, is more about the emotional side of human existence and coping with transience, but also searching for meanings and ordering memories.

The accounts analysed in this article are not solely fantastic narratives; they contain a great deal of unique detail that could not have been obtained from other sources. Contemporary myths offer insight into the public perception of the ruins of the *Wisła* facilities. They also reveal how the general public copes with material relics of the uneasy past and how they are imprinted into the collective memory. Netnographical accounts from former soldiers, on the other hand, shared interesting information about everyday routines, service conditions and the layout of the garrisons—details that are usually preserved only in memories, as they are rarely recorded in official documentation and rarely produce tangible sources. In conclusion, the discussed narratives can be approached on at least two levels: first, as sources containing factual details (with the necessary application of a critical approach); second, as accounts of public perception of material heritage, factors causing public interest in certain prominent sites, and their entanglement with contemporary socio-cultural practices.

## Acknowledgement

I want to thank Paul Barford for his suggestions and the proofreading.

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