

Contrasting Perceptions of Cold War Military Legacy Sites in Latvia: Residents' Attitudes and Behaviours

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During the Cold War, global tensions were reflected in the everyday lives of local people, and these local dimensions in the landscape are visible reminders of the past, even today. In European countries, including Latvia, Cold War legacies are abundant, ranging from Soviet military bases of varying sizes to partisan bunkers and battlefields. Some of the sites and memorials are well-preserved and functional, while others are in a state of decay. The sites built by alien powers or created to resist the Soviets nowadays can be a source of difficulty and conflict among different community groups. Previous studies have explored how the presence of Cold War legacies influences the attitudes and opinions of local people across various groups, the discourse surrounding the legacy, interest in visiting places, and engagement in decision-making processes. Previous studies suggest that attitudes towards the Cold War legacy and behaviors are influenced by residents' age group, nationality, and personal connection to the legacy (Seljamaa et al., 2018; Paulus & Brekke, 2022). Miller (2019) states that younger residents are more eager to learn about these sites, while older ones who have experienced the occupation period still feel uncomfortable around such sites.

Considering the number of alien power sites established in the Cold War, the presence of multiple contexts (e.g., location, sensitivity, size, and type of the legacy, its physical state, as well as sociodemographic characteristics of the community), consequences for the landscape and communities, there are not enough studies exploring the complexities of the Cold War legacy. This research examines the attitudes of residents towards the Cold War legacy in two territories: Daugavpils City and Balvi County. Each features distinct historical narratives, types of sites, spatial structures, and sociodemographic patterns of the population, which add another layer that highlights dissonance. The data were collected through structured interviews with residents in Daugavpils (n = 108) and the Balvi region (n = 43), conducted in person from April to June 2025.

Daugavpils is the second-largest city in Latvia, with a predominantly Russian-speaking population. Balvi County is a rural territory where the majority of the population is Latvian. There are several ideologically controversial historical narratives related to the heritage that represent the legacy of the Cold War in both territories.

The study findings confirm previous research that ethnicity, age, Soviet-era experience, and personal affiliation have an impact on attitudes toward the Cold War legacy. For example, Dubrovins Park, where both the memorial to Soviet soldiers and the recreation area are located, is more associated with recreation by the younger generation, while the older generation has ambiguous views, as it is primarily a memorial site and a symbol of the Soviet period. It is noticeable that in predominantly Russian-speaking Daugavpils, people are less willing to express their opinions about the legacy of the Cold War period. In Balvi County, the residents have a closer personal affiliation with the legacy of the period (bunkers of the national partisans), but this does not mean they visit these sites more frequently. At the same time, for the locals, knowing the stories of the Partisans is part of their identity. Divided opinions exist on whether the Cold War sites should be presented to tourists. Slightly more than half of the participants in both destinations believe that the residents benefit from the presence of the sites, as they help preserve collective memory and history, ensure that sites are taken care of, encourage tourism and create jobs, and serve as a resource for education.

As a result, the majority of residents support the preservation and promotion of Cold War heritage.

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