

From Cold War Legacy to Future Heritage: A Value-Based Framework for Military Heritage Management

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Despite its social, educational, economic, and symbolic significance, military heritage (MH) remains an underexplored field in academic research. One important aspect of this heritage is the legacy of the Cold War, which — although often perceived as an ‘imaginary’ war — remains both nationally and globally relevant. Over the past decade, researchers from countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Taiwan, and the Nordic and Baltic States have increasingly focused their attention on the legacies of the Cold War. Their work has categorised this heritage, investigated strategies for its preservation or intentional neglect, and explored its potential for education and tourism.

In Latvia — formerly the westernmost border of the USSR — the legacy of the Cold War is particularly visible. The landscape encompasses a diverse range of sites, from popular tourist attractions to unattractive, degraded and abandoned locations. However, Latvia currently lacks clear national or local strategies to determine which of these sites should be preserved as heritage, especially given their broader transnational significance. Some sites have even undergone disinheritance during processes of national identity formation, reflecting a broader challenge of managing difficult heritage.

Globally, interest in military heritage is growing, particularly in the tourism sector, where well-preserved and well-promoted sites often serve as powerful attractions for visitors. This study proposes a conceptual framework for the identification, preservation, and management of Cold War military heritage sites, supporting effective heritage governance and decision-making. It employs the heritage values approach (Pearson & Sullivan, 1995; Sahraianjahromi & Olgaç Türker, 2021) alongside for assessment and management (Satterfield, 2002). Ten in-depth interviews were conducted with national-level military heritage experts to identify which values are most relevant to Cold War heritage.

The analysis revealed two categories of values: core values and transformative values, which are of key importance for decisions on future preservation or deliberate “forgetting”. The core values include a unique heritage value (architectural, aesthetic, artistic, historical, technological, etc.), a unique and powerful story, a historical milestone, and authenticity. Transformative values encompass educational potential, economic self-sustainability (including tourism or other forms of income), the influence of interest groups, the presence of multiple levels of heritage, the degree of dissonance, and relevance to the dominant political ideology, among others. Based on these findings, a four-quadrant matrix was created to guide decision-making around site preservation or abandonment.

This multidimensional approach enables Cold War sites to enable evidence-based decision-making regarding preservation, safeguarding, conservation, or abandonment, as well as the development of effective management strategies.

Finally, the study emphasizes the importance of engaging a wide range of stakeholders — including local communities, site managers, tourism professionals, and visitors — to better understand diverse perspectives on the value of military heritage. Recognising differing views is essential for addressing potential conflicts and challenges in heritage site management.

References

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