

# Cold War Heritage in Sweden: Pastime Threats, Cosy Cavers and Gendered Nostalgia

Written by Mattias Frihammar

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MATTIAS FRIHAMMAR, MAY 15 2021

In Sweden, a nation that historically has nurtured a self-image of being neutral, peaceful and gender progressive, initiatives have recently been implemented to preserve the memory of the Cold War. For instance, since 2005, more than 20 military establishments from the period have been turned into museums with state funding. Additionally, many stakeholders outside of national memory institutions, from entrepreneurs and civil society organizations to enthusiasts and non-profit groups, have converted former military sites into tourist establishments and residential or recreational areas (Frihammar, Krohn Andersson, Wendt, Åse 2021). This development has an interesting sociocultural side, as legacies of military activities are central in national narratives. Thus, Sweden stands out as an intriguing case in which an extensive military heritage needs to be reconciled with the prominent national narratives of peace and neutrality. Another interesting aspect concerns Swedish militarisation and the associated ideals of masculine protection in relation to the national rhetoric of gender equality (Kronsell 2012).

Examples in this essay come from the research project Making a Military Heritage. Gender and Nation in Sweden's Cold War History, a collaboration between researchers from the fields of gender studies, ethnology, political science and architecture history. The project combines Feminist International Relations and Critical Heritage Studies with the overarching aim of understanding how gender and nation become significant when memories and remnants of the Cold War begin to be understood, displayed and considered as heritage. In the project as a whole, a wide range of cold war heritages are scrutinized. In this essay, the exposition begins with a brief description of the militarization in Sweden during the Cold War, followed by a presentation of some of the ways in which military facilities have been re-used for different purposes since the end of the Cold War. It continues by directing the spotlight on a specific type of war remnant, namely, bunkers and shelters. Here, the aim is to demonstrate how these abandoned, remote and presumably secret facilities today attract a special kind of enthusiast, so-called 'bunkerologists' (Bennett 2013), drawing attention to the production of masculinity as a structuring principle in the course of actions. Why do these men, because it is almost exclusively men, seek out old abandoned military installations from the Cold War? What kind of nostalgia do old bunkers activate? How does it entail gender?

Several studies have analysed the production, usage and enactments of war and cold war heritage as political, cultural, aesthetic and economic resources (Frihammar & Silverman 2018; Gegner & Ziino 2012; Rampley 2012; MacDonald 2009; Schofield & Cocroft 2007). However, in countries that lack recent and extensive experience of active warring, such as Sweden, military heritage processes remain a relatively unexplored phenomenon (with some exceptions: Axelsson and Persson 2016; Feldmann 2013; Cronqvist 2012; Linderoth 2011).

In the analysis, heritage refers to processes through which the past becomes a resource for, and in, the present. Heritage is thus conceptualized as a process that establishes connections between memory, identity and specific objects and places (Harrison 2013; Smith 2006; Harvey 2001). The reuses and reinterpretations of the bunkers and shelters are seen as processes where the bunkerologists try out and/or negotiate gender roles, specifically masculinity. Gender is here theorized as the creation of identity, whereas different norms, ideals and preconditions interact and where masculinity and femininity are produced as opposites (Connell 1995). Given the military character of this specific heritage, the division between a masculinized protective position versus a feminized protected position becomes central to the analysis (Åse 2016).

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## Sweden, a Peace-Loving Nation?

Sweden did not take an active part in neither the First World War nor the Second World War (and was not, unlike its neighbouring countries, occupied). The image of Sweden as neutral and peaceful has been, and is still, reproduced with emphasis. Indeed, the phrase 'Sweden has not been in a war in 200 years' is an often-repeated saying in the national geopolitical debate. However, describing Sweden as a nation without military experience is not true. During World War II, Sweden deployed a policy of neutrality, and after the war, Sweden wanted to conserve its neutral position. A paradoxical consequence was that to make the neutral position credible, a large weapons industry and active weapons export were considered necessary. Since Sweden was well stocked compared to the countries that had participated in WWII, the weapons industry grew fast and Sweden became, and still is, among the world's largest arms exporters.

One example of expansive weapons exportation is the 'success' of the recoilless rifle named Carl Gustaf (which by tradition is a royal name in Sweden; for example, the present king of Sweden goes by the name Carl XVI Gustaf). The weapon, also known as the Gustaf Bazooka, was first developed in 1946 and is still in production. It is today used by many armies around the world and has become so common that it has been given various nicknames in different military national contexts; British troops call it 'Charlie G', Canadian troops 'Carl G', the U.S. army 'The Goose' or 'Carl Johnson', and in Australia, it is called 'Charlie Gutsache'. It has been in use in a number of wars (the Falklands War, Lebanese Civil War, Gulf War, Kargil War, War in Afghanistan, Iraq War, Eelam War IV, Libyan Civil War, and Syrian Civil War, among others).

A consequence of the considerable cultural impact of the politics of neutrality was that mandatory male conscription was deemed necessary (Åselius 2005; cf Agrell 2010). This meant that each year, approximately 40,000 young men were engaged in military training. The citizens' relation to, and experience of, military defence was thus explicitly gendered. The mandatory conscription system lasted until 2010, when it was replaced with combat units.

Sweden was highly engaged in building a military as well as a civil defence during the Cold War period. In the 1960s, Sweden had one of the largest air forces in the world, consisting of more than 4,000 aircraft. In addition, Sweden had among the highest rates of bomb shelters per capita in the world (Hörnfeldt 2015; Cronqvist 2008). Paradoxically, despite the routinely repeated national 'old song of peace' (Burch 2013), militarization has been a cornerstone in Swedish welfare society during the Cold War. If the metaphor 'Folkhemmet', 'the Peoples home' was used to describe the cosy interior of the Swedish welfare state, 'the people's defence' (folkförsvaret) can be described as the cold hard protective surface (see also Cronqvist 2012). The national rhetoric of peace and neutrality has always been paralleled by a profound militarization, the traces of which today are found in every corner of Swedish territory in the form of abandoned bunkers, rebuilt shelters, and overgrown concrete anti-tank obstacles. If you know how to look, you will see that the Swedish urban and rural landscapes are actually full of military provisions. Additionally, the sociocultural landscape is formed by the Cold War militarization, as practically every Swedish man born before 1990 has first-hand experience with military training. Additionally, Swedish arms have been used in most wars and armed conflicts around the world.

The end of the Cold War meant a radical change in the Swedish defence strategy, including a fundamental downsizing and professionalization of the Swedish military forces. However, mandatory conscription, which was abandoned in 2010, has recently been reinstated. Importantly, a radical change in the new system is that enlistment is now gender neutral and includes both women and men. The mandatory male conscription that formed a close relationship between the armed forces and the male citizen and made masculine protector ideals central to the Swedish Cold War experience (Åse 2016) has ended. In other words, the system that had strengthened gendered citizenship (Kronsell 2012; Sundevall 2011; Eduards 2007;) by underpinning a male protective privilege (Young 2003; Tickner 2001) was replaced by a system that equalled the co-responsibility of women and men to serve in the name of the nation.

The heritagization of military installations in Sweden stands out as interesting, given the complexities associated with a postwar identity based on neutrality, internationalism and peace-building (Stråth 2000), in combination with the 'deep militarization' that characterized Swedish society during the postwar era (Kronsell 2012) as well as later

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changes in regard to gender aspects.

## Different ways to reuse military facilities

The amount of provisions left from the Cold War era has provided a wide range of different ways to reuse the facilities. A common way has been to rebuild abandoned company houses for housing or everyday practices such as offices. In the city of Ystad, for example, a whole regimental area has received civilian functions. Similar developments can be seen in Skövde, Linköping, Karlstad, Sollefteå, Karlskrona, Borås, Strängnäs, Kristinehamn, Västerås, Vaxholm, Örebro Boden and Kiruna. On northern Gotland, the Bungenäs area, which was previously a closed military training area with many bunkers and air defences, has today been redesigned into luxury holiday accommodations. Here, the military installations are used to create a Cold War aesthetic (for a further analysis of Bungenäs, see Åse & Wendt 2021 and Frihammar & Krohn Andersson 2020)

Many military settings have been turned into conference centres or hotels. One example is Airbase F4 in Jämtland, which closed in 2005 and is now the Quality Hotel Frösö Park and Conference Center. Another is Hemsö Fästning, near Härnösand. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of Sweden's largest defence facilities, has been relaunched as 'A bulletproof attraction for the whole family', where you can look at radar equipment and command and control rooms, as well as eat your Christmas lunch.

As mentioned, many milieus have been turned into official, or semi-official, museums (for an in-depth analysis of some of the exhibitions see Wendt 2021). Figure 1 and Figure 2 (see below) show examples from Gothenburg's Aeroseum, a former hangar in a cavern of 22,000 m<sup>2</sup>, and from the Army's defence museum at Boden in the north of Sweden.

The new museum genre that has developed in the wake of the downsizing of military activities and the network gathering military museums (<https://www.smha.se/>) count slightly more than 25 museums. They are labelled 'experience museums' and are all specifically targeted towards children and are connected to the Swedish military heritage network. Nevertheless, however interesting these museums and curated exhibitions may be found, they do not seem to fully satisfy one type of 'bunker connoisseur', that is, the so-called bunkerologists (Bennett 2012). Bunkerologists are (almost only) men who seek to satisfy a desire to revive the atmosphere of the Cold War by visiting abandoned military sites in their spare time. The specific setting in which the Cold War feeling seems to be activated is abandoned and former secret bomb shelters and bunkers. In Sweden, there is an extensive network of people completely engaged in this type of exploration of abandoned bunkers. The same phenomenon is also found in other national contexts (see for example Bennett 2017). The mono-masculine group composition has been explained by the fact that bunkers bring together several characteristics that appeal to men by custom and tradition (Bennett 2012). In this essay, the approach is another; that the bunkers are interpreted as spaces filled with nostalgic masculinity through heritagization.

## Cosy Cavers

In Sweden, one node in this nostalgic production of meaning network is a Facebook group called *Svenska hemligheter/Svenska hemliga rum* that translates to Swedish secrets/Secret Swedish rooms. The group has approximately 50,000 members who share pictures from their shelter/bunker excursions, the location of hidden abandoned shelters, general information on Swedish military history and so forth. The following analysis is based on the feed in the Facebook group and on interviews with recognized bunker enthusiasts. I will describe image content, but due to ethical considerations, I will not publish any pictures. However, I will cite some of the comments translated from Swedish to English, where the transformation from one language to another will make it difficult to trace each citation to the source.

One post presents a suite of pictures from what appears to be a rather large space. The walls are made of concrete. In one picture, there are seventeen red metal rounds, approximately one metre in diameter, organized beside and above a red door. It is difficult for a nonexpert to understand the function of the metal rounds, but they give a quite aesthetic impression. Another picture shows a construction of concrete beams and the silhouettes of three persons in

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dragging backlight. Only parts of the walls, floor and roof are reached by the source of light. The comment that accompanies the photographs reads: 'A small revisit to one of the coolest [places] I have ever experienced, several thousand square metres of pure love of moisture, rock and concrete. The facility is still in use today, but for something completely different.'

Another post shows a picture taken from the top of a staircase that is cast in concrete. The walls are also concrete, with parts of exposed rocks here and there. At the bottom of the staircase, you see a dusky wall (also concrete) with a partly open grid door, but it is not possible to see what is inside. The handrails that run along the stairs accentuate the sloping perspective of the picture. The roof is in the dark. The comment reads: 'My fiancé asked me what makes me happy! I sent this picture as an answer'. A third post shows a dark picture, where you barely see the contours of a very worn and damp room. An iron handrail and an iron door are full of rust. The only comment accompanying the photo says: 'Longing'. However, another suite of pictures demonstrates the same kind of milieu, but adds a photograph from an empty corridor where a torch lights up the open doors along the walls. It may seem like a gloomy, abandoned place, but the comment is cheerful: 'Caverns, check. Flashlight, check. Drawings, check. Nice company, check. A Thursday night can't be better. Smiley'.

The pattern continues, post after post, with photographs of dark caverns with enthusiastic and positive comments. One picture showing a cavern asks: 'Do you know the scent?'. This comment can be regarded in light of an answer from an interview with a bunker enthusiast. When asked how he knew if a facility he just found was a good spot, he said: 'It is the scent! I know this will sound nerdy, but I also know many will understand what I mean. Because we often talk about the scent, this is a good mountain, because it smells!'

Next to a photo of a similar cavern in another post, whose byline says 'Relaxing'. '2500 square metres of damp, frost, darkness and pure love' is another comment. The majority of photographs are without people. The mentioned silhouettes are an exception, as is the child in one picture, where the byline says, using symbols: 'Father&Son day'. In some cases, an expression has been taken notice of and begins to be reused. One example is the way of describing the experience as 'cosy', as in 'Sunday Cosiness', 'Cosy Saturday snow', 'Good Friday Cosiness' and 'Cosy Friday with two friends'.

How shall we understand these enthusiastic and emotional pictures and comments? Why do the caverns make the men, because this is exclusively men, feel love, be relaxed, be happy, delighted and thrilled? In what way do they find a damp and raw bunker cosy? What is it in the scent that makes them sparkle with joy?

## Bunkers as Homo-Social Retreats

In the Facebook feed, references to violence remain latent. The photos do, in some cases, communicate feelings of threat by accentuating the places as dangerous or outside the protective rules of society. However, what is primarily reproduced is community and cohesion between the members of the group. In a homo-social process, the raw and worn physical structures are reinterpreted as cosy, relaxing and in other ways desirable. The connotation of social consideration is also mirrored in one of our interviews, when a bunker enthusiast stated that he sees the shelters and bunkers of the Cold War as reflections of a state that truly cared for its citizens (in contrast to contemporary society). In these contexts, the bunkers are made to speak of the Cold War as a period of unity, collective organization and security.

However, through an analytical shift of perspective, a thrilling hint of risk and death can be noticed in meaning-making surrounding the bunkers. The facilities' 'raison d'être', reason for being, is related to the risk of war, whether it was to offer your life while defending the nation or to kill the enemy. By dwelling in these remaining fragments of Sweden's once strong people's defence, the bunkerologists become linked to the ultimate symbol of masculine bravery—the sacrifice of life on the battlefield while protecting the nation. Since the bunkers are understood retrospectively, the concept of nostalgia is necessary to understand what this is about: the timespan contributes an evocative dimension in the narrative of the Cold War. The literary scholar Svetlana Boym (2001) describes nostalgia as more than an individual emotion. Rather, nostalgia should be seen as a 'symptom of our age', which is a sentiment produced by modernity's tendency to understand time as constant change. Nostalgia is thus a productive yearning

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for something different, where the past is used as a projection surface. In this, nostalgia is the construction of ideals. The paradox is that these ideal images of the past in a fundamental way are determined by present needs and have bearing on how the future is perceived. However, nostalgia is not to be understood as a definite emotion. In contrast, nostalgia is ambiguous in its nature and operates in a field of tension between two types of reminiscences: the restorative type and the reflective type. Restorative nostalgia stresses the prefix *nostos*, homecoming. This way of understanding the past is not thought of as nostalgia but rather as truth and tradition and expresses a will to reconstruct a home that has been lost. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, stresses the suffix of the word, *álgos*, the pain or ache, underpinning the longing, contemplating the changes of time, thinking nostalgically of times that have past.

There are no absolute boundaries between the two types, but they reflect different attitudes towards, and uses of, the past. Restorative nostalgia protects what is thought of as the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. The reworking of the past in the present through the examples I have given oscillates between a restorative and a reflective modus. On the one hand, the nostalgic frame stressed is the previous international instability and threat of a war or a nuclear bomb. On the other hand, the time gap itself seems to work as a kind of sandpaper, filing the scariest edges down, leaving a streamlined version of history. The nostalgic modus facilitates the paradoxical (re)production of the image of Sweden as neutral and peacekeeping within a military milieu.

A Freudian interpretation of the male craze for abandoned bunkers might be that it has to do with male penetration. This understanding may also be nurtured by a passage from one of the interviews where a drive to be the first to find a facility that is untouched is said to be the motor in bunker exploration, a kind of post-military deflowering ritual. However, departing from an ethnological perspective, the male exploration of abandoned bunkers is better understood in cultural terms, not psychotically. In a national context where the male protection monopoly has been put out of order, paralleled with a general devaluation of other male privileges, perhaps the bunkers offer a time journey back to a period when military masculinity and masculine violence were sanctioned and saluted by the state. I, therefore, propose that abandoned bunkers can be thought of as protective 'Man Caves'. They were built by and for men; therefore, men belong to the bunkers. They are found in remote areas, which nobody outside the community will find. The sharing of secret locations contributes to a sense of belonging. In other words, the bunkers become arenas for performances of gendered protection and a nostalgic reenactment of a male protective privilege.

In summary, despite Sweden's image spread both internally and externally, as the anthesis of military conflicts and war, the Cold War period in Sweden was characterized by a total defence strategy resulting in a deeply militarized society. While rhetorically framing the welfare state as a way to create an inclusive 'people's home', the Swedish geopolitics of neutrality nurtured investments in the weapons industry and exports. The mandatory conscription system, including all male citizens, gendered the experience of being the protector of the nation, reinforcing a gender binarity of citizenship. After the downsizing of the Swedish military defence organization after the Cold War, which left innumerable military provisions without care or purpose, a manifold of actors re-interpreted the remnants as heritage. Analysing the nostalgically driven bunkerolog movement, this essay has shown how abandoned bunkers and shelters from the Cold War today serve as arenas for the production of a protective masculinity. In this heritagization, the image of the Swedish welfare society with a strong defence army serves as an ideal, in contrast to today's gender-neutral conscription system. The presumed gender binary and heterosexuality of the past social order make way for a narrative of a male military hero who is prepared to kill and to be killed in the name of the nation.

## Figures

Figure 1: Interior from Army of Defence Museum in Boden. Photo by Mattias Frihammar.

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Figure 2: Interior from Aerozeum in Gothenburg. Photo: Mattias Frihammar.



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**Mattias Frihammar** has a Ph.D in ethnology from Stockholm University. His research includes difficult legacies, cultural aspects of death, and military heritages. He is currently engaged in the project 'Making a Military Heritage. Gender and Nation in Sweden's Cold War History'. The project has a transdisciplinary approach, featuring researchers from ethnology, political science, gender studies, art and architectural history who collectively explore how Sweden's Cold War history is given societal meaning.