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FROM NUCLEAR MISSILE HANGAR TO PIGSTY: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PHOTO-ESSAY ON THE 1962 WORLD CRISIS

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Abstract: Half a century ago – in October 1962 – the world was on the threshold to the unthinkable: a full-scale nuclear war between the USA and the Soviet Union. The focus of the conflict was a number of Soviet launching sites for medium-range missiles situated in the Cuban countryside. Today, at first glance it is difficult to discover traces at these sites that testify to their important role in twentieth-century history. A closer look, however, reveals not only material remains but also an extensive, peaceful reuse of elements from the former military installations. This photo-essay presents some of the material evidence found during archaeological fieldwork at the missile site at Santa Cruz de los Pinos, also known as San Cristobal 3, situated c. 100 kilometres west of Havana.

Keywords: archaeology of the contemporary past, Cuba, material reuse, Missile Crisis, photo-essay

This photo-essay is based on archaeological fieldwork conducted within a Swedish-Cuban research project. The general idea behind the project was to look for ways of telling the story of the 1962 Missile Crisis other than the ‘big history’ that has been told over and over (cf. Burström et al. 2009). We set our minds on discovering what kind of memories remain today at the former missile sites – in the ground as well as in people’s minds – and investigating this.

The results of the project have been published in Journal of Social Archaeology and we refer to that paper for an overall account (Burström et al. 2009). We believe, however, that there is some truth in the old saying ‘A picture is worth a thousand words’ and we have therefore also produced a photo-book (Burström, Gustafsson & Karlsson 2011). This essay presents a pictorial account of one of the sites, Santa Cruz de los Pinos, which once could have been the beginning of the end of it all.

Concrete Evidence. This heavily reinforced bridge is found in the outskirts of Santa Cruz de los Pinos. Its dimensions are not what you would expect for a small town in the Cuban countryside. The explanation is that the bridge was modified by Soviet engineer troops in the summer of 1962 to carry the heavy weight vehicles of a missile regiment.
Local Knowledge. While the former missile sites are little-known in general, there is, of course, a lot of local knowledge. Julio Luaces Domingues, here leaning on an arch from a missile hangar, knows the locality very well indeed and he also has a lot of memories from the time when the site was functioning. For a long period of time, however, the Missile Crisis has been a part of the rarely discussed past in Cuba (Burström et al. 2009).

Extinct Species. The most easily distinguishable remains of the former missile site in Santa Cruz de los Pinos are the ruins of the demolished missile hangar. The concrete arches were produced in the Soviet Union and then transported all the way to Cuba. Now they lay helter-skelter and look like the bleached ribs of some long-extinct giant animal. It reminds us that the Soviet Union has also ceased to exist.
Keeping Watch. Time passes and today the arches from the missile hangar are reused in a variety of ways. This farmer’s dog is keeping watch over a cattle fold built of two arches and concrete plates collected from the ruin nearby. In the middle of the fold, a hen, oblivious to anything but the present, is pecking at kitchen refuse.

Rust in Peace. A piece of military equipment found in a heap with scrap. Local farmers collect material that may come to good (re-)use some day. The general shortage of goods in the Cuban countryside makes people attentive to anything that can be useful.
**Bridging Past and Present.** Among the most reused components from the missile site is a kind of perforated iron mat that originally was laid on the ground to improve passability. Now this mat leads over a small ditch to the entrance of a private home.

**Bottoms Up!** Yet another reuse of an iron mat: this time as a bottle holder outside a house. It satisfies our archaeological gaze to notice that the bottles are not randomly put in place, but sorted according to colour—green, brown, transparent.
Bricolage. The one reuse is more spectacular than the other; the inventiveness in using what there is to be found in a scarce material environment is impressive. This pigsty is almost entirely built of material collected from the missile site.

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