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Memories of a world crisis
The archaeology of a former Soviet nuclear missile site in Cuba

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ABSTRACT
Santa Cruz de los Pinos is a small town like most others in the Cuban countryside. But half a century ago it was the epicenter of the 1962 Missile Crisis. During that time it served as a Soviet base for middle-range nuclear missiles, and the US air reconnaissance photos of it were spread through media all around the world. The crisis was solved through negotiations without Cuban involvement, and as a result of this neglect the Missile Crisis has been an under-communicated part of history in Cuba. A Swedish–Cuban research project has now investigated what kinds of memories of the crisis remain today at the former missile base – in the ground as well as in people’s minds. Digging in the ground has proved to be an effective way to start a remembering process and to help disarm a politically loaded history and uncover stories other than those dominating ‘big history’.

KEYWORDS
Cuba • material remains • memory • Missile Crisis • missile site • remembering process • reuse • under-communicated history

The 1962 Missile Crisis is a well-known episode of the Cold War and twentieth-century history. It is well documented in a rich variety of sources, and has been the subject of extensive historical research. The story of the Missile Crisis has actually been told so many times that it almost writes itself. It is dominated by the political motives behind the development at large, the military strategy, the leaders of the two superpowers and their personalities, and the top-level diplomacy that took place in order to solve the crisis (Blight, 1990; Blight and Welch, 1989; Dobbs, 2008; Fursenko and Naftali, 1997).

It is well known that some stories about the recent past are repeated again and again while others are given less attention and have difficulty making themselves heard (Buchli and Lucas, 2001: 14). So what about other perspectives on the Missile Crisis? In an attempt to find and give voice to stories other than those dominating ‘big history’ we have studied the crisis from an archaeological perspective. We want to find out what material remains the Missile Crisis has generated and explore whether archaeology can be used to begin a remembering process and attract interest to a past that otherwise would not be discussed. Our point of departure is one of the former Soviet nuclear missile bases in Cuba. Our results strongly suggest that doing archaeology is in many ways as important, if not more important, than what actually emerges from the ground.

The project is a cooperation between a group of Swedish archaeologists and Cuban anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians. We have also
worked together with Swedish National Television, which has made a documentary about the Missile Crisis and the project.

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THE ‘BIG HISTORY’

The stories dominating the history of the recent past are usually concerned with events at a very high and general level. Let us briefly recount the main themes in the ‘big history’ of the Missile Crisis. These are the ones we want to supplement with other stories.

An important part of the prelude to the crisis was the Bay of Pigs invasion in south-west Cuba in April 1961. A group of approximately 1400 US-supported exile Cubans attempted to land there and start a counter-revolution in order to overthrow the revolutionary government. The invaders were quickly defeated and the operation was a military and political fiasco. The victory strengthened the position of the Cuban leader Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolution at the same time as it further impaired the relations between Cuba and the USA.

The need to defend the Cuban revolution against new US attacks and to maintain Soviet prestige in Latin America were the reasons given by the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev for suggesting the installation of missiles with nuclear warheads in Cuba. In his memoirs (1970: 493–4), Khrushchev states:

> If Cuba fell, other Latin American countries would reject us, claiming that for all our might the Soviet Union hadn’t been able to do anything for Cuba except to make empty protests to the United Nations. We had to think up some way of confronting America with more than words. We had to establish a tangible and effective deterrent to American interference in the Caribbean. But what exactly? The logical answer was missiles. . . .

> My thinking went like this: if we installed the missiles secretly and then if the United States discovered the missiles were there after they were already poised and ready to strike, the Americans would think twice before trying to liquidate our installations by military means.

The Soviet proposal to install missiles with nuclear warheads in Cuba was presented to the Cuban leadership in May 1962, and they agreed to accept the offer without any hesitation. The Cuban leader Fidel Castro commented that they did not really like the missiles but their installation would contribute to Cuba’s defense and also strengthen the socialist camp (Diez Acosta, 2002a: 100–3). The top-secret move of missiles and Soviet forces to Cuba – Operation Anadyr – was initiated and the first units arrived in early August.

On 14 October 1962, US air reconnaissance discovered what the following day was interpreted as Soviet launching sites for nuclear missiles. This was the immediate trigger of the Missile Crisis. The US military was eager
to launch an immediate and direct attack on Cuba with the aim of getting rid of the missiles as well as overthrowing the revolutionary government (Allison, 1994; May and Zelikow, 1997). However, President John F. Kennedy excluded this solution and a week later he gave his famous speech to the nation where he announced the establishment of a naval blockade against Cuba. He stated that:

> It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union. (Kennedy, 1962)

This meant that the world was now on the threshold to the unthinkable – full-scale nuclear war (Kahn, 1962). The Soviets denied the existence of the launching sites, but convincing evidence was presented to the world at the United Nations Security Council by the US ambassador (Allyn et al., 1992; Blight, 1990).

The missiles that were operational in Cuba were medium-range missiles of a type called R-12 by the Soviets and SS 4 by NATO. There were 36 missiles deployed at six different sites in Cuba. Each missile contained a nuclear warhead 70 times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb. They had a range of 1400 miles (approx. 2250 km) which meant that they could reach Washington DC. Installations were also built for long-distance missiles (R-14), but they were never operational since the warheads did not reach Cuba as a result of the blockade (Díez Acosta, 2002a: 118–19, 2002b).

The US naval blockade started on 24 October. At the same time intensive negotiations were taking place between Washington and Moscow. In the extremely tense situation an accident or ill-considered action on either side could have started a nuclear war (Blight et al., 1991, 1993; Kennedy, 1969: 127). All over the world people anxiously awaited news about the development of the crisis. On 28 October Khrushchev accepted an offer from Kennedy, including a secret promise to withdraw US nuclear missiles from Turkey, and he ordered the dismantling and return of all offensive weapons back to the USSR. After 13 days ‘when the world stood still’ (Kennedy, 1969) the crisis finally came to an end.

### THE AFTERMATH OF ‘BIG HISTORY’

The Missile Crisis can be considered to have a happy ending; there was no Armageddon. But the solution of the crisis created great political tension in the relationship between Cuba and the Soviet Union. The reason was that all the important negotiations during the crisis had taken place directly between Washington and Moscow, without involving Havana. As a
consequence, in Cuba the Missile Crisis is considered to be somewhat of a national disgrace. Although they were the epicenter of the conflict, they had no say in the matter. At the 1992 tripartite conference about the history of the Missile Crisis in Havana (Blight et al., 1993: 214), the Cuban leader Fidel Castro declared that:

Not only was this decision taken without consulting us, several steps were taken without informing us. (…) So we were humiliated. (…) The reaction of our nation was of profound indignation, not relief.

The Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, on the other hand, chose to see the crisis as a victory. The objective to defend the Cuban revolution by preventing a US invasion had been achieved. In his memoirs (Khrushchev, 1970: 500) he claims:

It was a great victory for us, though, that we had been able to extract from Kennedy a promise that neither America nor any of her allies would invade Cuba.

And further (1970: 504):

The Caribbean crisis was a triumph of Soviet foreign policy and a personal triumph in my own career as a statesman and as a member of the collective leadership. We achieved, I would say, a spectacular success without having to fire a single shot!

The national humiliation felt by the Cuban leadership has led to the Missile Crisis being an under-communicated part of Cuban history. So, while it is one of the most well-known episodes in modern Cuban history to most people outside Cuba, it is given paradoxically little attention in Cuba. The exhibition at the Museum of the Revolution in Havana is a good example of this. Although the museum contains a seemingly endless number of exhibition cases, there is only one that briefly touches on the Missile Crisis.

■ POINTS OF DEPARTURE

During the last decade material remains from the Cold War have attracted archaeological interest. The main reason is that many military installations from this period are now being abandoned by the military and instead becoming the responsibility of heritage management (Allen, 2005; Cocroft and Thomas, 2003; English Heritage, 2002; Hutchings, 2005; Schmidt and von Preuschen, 2005; Schofield, 2005; Schofield and Cocroft, 2007; Schofield et al., 2002).

Most archaeological research on the materiality of the Cold War highlights questions concerning technical and military aspects of the remains, their heritage value, and how they can be preserved. Usually, little interest
is paid to the memories held by people living in communities around the
sites and the stories these people can tell about them. We believe this is a
mistake; local people have much to add to our archaeological understand-
ing of the sites, and their participation is also important for democratic
reasons. They have a right to make their voices heard about a past that
affected them, and in which they also played a part.

In this project we combine the study of material remains with studies of
memories and stories told by local people in order to gain new knowledge
about the Missile Crisis and its human dimensions. Remains of the recent
past have a remarkable potential to affect people; they make history a
concern and awaken memories. Some of these memories recall events
which once did happen, while others are consciously or unconsciously
constructed to make the past comprehensible or perhaps bearable
(Burström, 2009). People remember differently, and the multi-vocality of
the recent past brings the democratic dimensions in writing history to the
fore; history is constructed for different reasons in different contexts. An
important aspect of the project is to interact with the local community and
talk about how the Missile Crisis history is constructed.

In view of the official Cuban attitude towards the Missile Crisis, you
would expect difficulties in getting permission to visit the former Soviet
missile bases and conduct archaeological research there. But even though
our interest probably seemed strange to many, we were granted the neces-
sary permission without considerable trouble. Permitting us to conduct
archaeology at the former missile sites may actually be a way to disarm a
politically loaded history. Since archaeology is generally associated with
deep time, it can be used to transform a recent and problematic history into
a seemingly distant past. This transformation makes it possible to look at
the crisis with new eyes.

In 1991 a general survey of the former missile sites was carried out by
a group of Cuban historians and military engineers (Diez Acosta, 1991).
This is the first example of recognizing some historical interest in these
sites. One of the sites (San Cristobal 1) was also visited in October 2002
by the participants of the historical conference held in Havana in connec-
tion with the 40th anniversary of the crisis (National Security Archive,
2002). The missile sites have until now, however, not been the objects of
more thorough study.

We approached the former Soviet missile sites with the following
questions:

- What remains today – in the ground and in people’s minds – of the
  missile sites that were once a focus of world interest?
- Can digging in the ground be a way to uncover memories and
  generate conversations about a silenced past?
- What kind of memories do people have of the missile sites?
THE MISSILE SITES IN EL PURIO AND SITIECITO

Besides the site at Santa Cruz de los Pinos, which is the main focus of this study, we visited two other former sites for Soviet middle-range nuclear missiles. These were situated in El Purio and Sitiecito, both close to the town of Santa Clara in central Cuba.

In El Purio there is today a marble quarry at the former missile site. In an otherwise very stretched Cuban economy this quarry does quite well. Unfortunately this means that the material remains from the Soviet base are in danger of destruction. When we visited the site in March 2005 one of the launch pads was very well preserved (Figure 1). It was on this pad that the missiles were to be erected into firing position. On our next visit nine months later, in December 2005, the launch pad had been overturned and partially destroyed (Figure 2). There is no obvious functional reason for this destruction, and it contradicts statements made by local officials acknowledging the historical value of the site. Nevertheless, it is difficult to disregard that the destruction could be due to a worry that if the site were protected as a cultural heritage site it would threaten economic interests.

Figure 1  Launch pad at El Purio in March 2005. Photo: Håkan Karlsson
El Purio is a very hot place indeed. The air is filled with vultures looking for creatures that have fallen victim to the heat. People in the area used to move away from the hot sun into the coolness of a small cave (Figure 3) in order to take a break. So did some Soviet soldiers in October 1962, and, as so many others visitors have, they killed some time by writing their names and the date on the cave wall (Figure 4). This graffiti is the only known example where the names of individual Soviet soldiers belonging to the missile forces in Cuba have been immortalized in this way. This unique example is now very much in danger of being destroyed by the quarrying. The possibility of cutting out the part of the cave wall with Soviet graffiti in order to save it for the future has been suggested.

A missile hangar still stands at the site inSitiecito. They were all supposed to be destroyed as part of the deal between the USA and the Soviet Union, but for some reason this one had been preserved along with two others located at the sites of El Cacho and Bartolomé (Diez Acosta, 1991). The hangar in Sitiecito was erected but never completely finished because of the development of the crisis and the fact that the Soviet soldiers were heavily plagued by mosquitoes at this particular site (Diez Acosta, 1991). The hangars served as a kind of assembly hall where the missile bodies and nuclear warheads were put together. The concrete components for the hangar were transported by ship all the way from the Soviet Union.

Figure 2  Launch pad at El Purio in December 2005. Photo: Mats Burström
THE MISSILE SITE AT SANTA CRUZ DE LOS PINOS

The Soviet missile site at Santa Cruz de los Pinos, or San Cristobal 3 as the site is named in US documents, is located about 100 kilometers west of Havana, and it was among the first to be discovered by US air

Figure 3  Cave at El Purio. Photo: Mats Burström
reconnaissance. In a high-level photo of the site taken on 17 October, erectors, a missile hangar and buildings under construction, missile trailers, and a tent area can be identified. In a low-level photo taken 10 days later, a nuclear warhead bunker, an open storage area, permanent barracks, and a launch area can be identified (Figure 5). Despite the fact that almost half a century has passed since these photos were taken, the overall use of the landscape and the spread of vegetation at the site are quite similar today.

Local people who lived in the area in 1962 had never seen the aerial photos taken during the crisis. Discussing the photos and trying to locate

**Figure 4** Soviet graffiti at El Purio. Photo: Håkan Karlsson
objects seen there in the present landscape engaged people and formed a good starting point for conversations about their memories of the crisis.

Today there are few visible signs that there once was a missile base in Santa Cruz de los Pinos. What first attracts an outsider’s attention are the arches from the destroyed missile hangar (Figure 6). They lie helter-skelter and look like the bleached ribs of some long-extinct giant animal. Another material testimony, which is easier to miss, is that parts of the road network in and around the village are constructed or modified in connection with the construction of the Soviet base. For example, some of the bridges had to be strengthened to withstand the heavy loads (Diez Acosta, 2002a: 110f.).

**DIGGING IN THE GROUND**

In 2005 we surveyed the missile site at Santa Cruz de los Pinos, and the first excavation was restricted to a test pit in a small mound of earth lying close
to the missile hangar. The mound was obviously manmade and probably consisted of material that was bulldozed away from what was to become the hangar floor. The only finds were some rubber straps, probably made from inner tubes of car tires. In a scrap heap belonging to the farmer living closest to the hangar we found another artifact. It was a grenade tube that he or his father had originally found somewhere in the close surroundings; he did not remember where or when, but it clearly derives from the Soviets. We also did some metal detecting at the site of a former farmhouse, which the local people said had been used by Soviet officers during the time of the base. The idea was to try to locate rubbish pits and lost objects connected with the house. A number of minor test pits were made where the metal detector gave response, but with the exception of some pieces of barbed wire of Soviet type it is not clear whether the objects (batteries, bottles, aluminum fragments, etc.) can be linked to the missile base.

In 2007 we continued our archaeological fieldwork at the site. One effort was directed towards the area that in the 1962 aerial photos was interpreted as an ‘open storage area’ (Figure 5). This was close to the ‘tent area’, and we assumed that a lot of activity would have taken place there. Therefore we used an excavator to make long search trenches (in total approx. 130

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**Figure 6**  Arches from the destroyed missile hangar in Santa Cruz de los Pinos. Photo: Mats Burström
meters) and a metal detector to investigate the earth that was dug up. We also surveyed other parts of the ‘open storage area’ and its surroundings with a metal detector. The result was very meager indeed. One of the few finds that match stories told by local people about the Soviet soldiers are splinters from a bottle with measure marks in the glass. This type of bottle was used for a special kind of extra strong rum (90%) called Alcoholitis, which was sold only at pharmacies. According to our informants, the Cubans considered it too strong to drink but the Russians appreciated it.

Another archaeological effort was directed towards the Soviet barracks (Figure 5). These were embarrassingly difficult to locate, partly because of fields with tall sugar cane. Eventually we discovered, however, that the barracks reveal themselves as a shift in color in a roadway. With the assistance of a bulldozer we uncovered two of the barracks down to the floor level and beyond. We also dug a trench in front of the entrances of four of the former eight barracks. This area, as well as the whole barracks area, was surveyed with a metal detector. We found very few artifacts and none that could be linked to the time of the Missile Crisis with certainty. There was actually no clear evidence that people had ever moved into and lived in the barracks, which would make sense since they were still under construction in the aerial photograph from 27 October, and the Soviet decision to withdraw all offensive weapons from Cuba was taken on 28 October.

AWAKENING MEMORIES

The purpose of our archaeological fieldwork at Santa Cruz de los Pinos was not only to search for material remains. We also wanted to create an arena where we could meet with local people and arouse their interest to talk about their experiences of the former Soviet base in particular and their memories of the Missile Crisis in general. Their stories are of a different kind than those dominating ‘big history’. Whether they are historically correct is not of vital importance to us in this specific context; what we are interested in is how the Missile Crisis is remembered. The study of memory in past societies and the materialization of memory are topics of growing archaeological interest (Bradley, 2002; Mills and Walker, 2008; Van Dyke and Alcock, 2003).

The Soviet base area was forbidden territory for all Cubans, civilians as well as military personnel, unless they had special permission to visit it. This means that most of the stories told by the local people deal with occurrences outside the base. In general, it seems that people living in the village did not know what was going on, and only a few refer to fear in connection with the Soviet military activities. Several said that they did not learn about the true character of the base until after the Missile Crisis. However, there
are also those who remember that they were convinced the base concealed something highly dangerous and that they all could die if something went wrong since they were living so close to it. Some people refer to the low-altitude US flights, which gave them the impression that war could break out at any time.

Quite a lot of stories revolve around the construction phase of the base. A number of farmers were forced to leave their homes with short notice and move away to make room for the missile base. They did not always get the time to collect all their livestock and other belongings before being relocated to new houses. This was a most trying experience. Speaking about this today, many were eager to express to us, and to the officials accompanying us, their loyalty to the Cuban revolution. But there were also those who had never forgotten or forgiven what they experienced as an injustice.

Another story concerns a street corner in the center of the small town of Santa Cruz de los Pinos. We heard several different versions of this story, but the common theme is that there used to be a house which stood on the right side of the street corner, which today is partly empty. When the missile trailers reached this corner they discovered that the curve was too narrow. All missile transports took place in the dark in an attempt to make them more difficult to discover from the air. The family that lived in the house at the right side of the street corner had to be wakened in the middle of the night by a high-ranking officer. He told them that they immediately had to evacuate their house since it was going to be pulled down to enable missile transports to make the turn. It is easy to imagine what a shock this must have been to the family. In another version of the story it was a shoe shop that was pulled down, not a family home. To us it is not vitally important which version – if any – is the historically correct one. What is interesting is that the physical environment, in this case actually the lack of material culture – the emptiness where you would normally expect a house – draws people’s attention and demands an explanation. The explanations given recall and recast the memories of the Missile Crisis.

Many local residents still have personal memories of the Russians, and there seem to have been good relations between the groups. The Russians are generally remembered as young, pale and polite. Only a few of them understood Spanish, and as none of the local people we met understood Russian they had difficulties communicating with each other. Despite this, there are memories of meetings and places where the young soldiers met with young people, mostly girls, from the village. In some cases this led to an exchange of letters that continued for many years after the crisis. The villagers who befriended the Soviet soldiers seemed sorry that the Russians had disappeared so quickly and that there had not been time for a proper goodbye.

The Soviet soldiers were not supposed to move around outside the base area, but we were told that when they were on leave and on their way to
or from the base they exchanged knives, leather boots and other clothes, soap, and wristwatches for rum. Although there are a lot of stories about watches received through exchange or as gifts, no one had any preserved evidence to show us. But the watches are kept very well stored in memory. It is almost as if they have become a metaphor for the passing and changing of time; the Missile Crisis is remembered through instruments for showing time but the instruments themselves are gone.

The Swedish part of the team has experienced how the project generates a remembering process even back in Sweden. When we talked with friends and colleagues about our work in Cuba, many of them suddenly started to remember how they themselves or people they know lived through the Missile Crisis. Many Swedes were convinced that there would be a nuclear world war and acted accordingly.

One of the stories we were told was about a man (Oloph Odenius, 1923–87) whose doctoral thesis was thwarted as a consequence of the Missile Crisis. He was a specialist in medieval art, and by 1962 he had spent at least 10 years collecting a great amount of material for his thesis at the National Library of Sweden. Since it was not easy back then to make copies of old documents and books, all the original sources were kept in a special room at the library that only he had access to. He had put slips of paper at those passages he was going to refer to in his thesis. One morning when he arrived at his room it was empty. All his slips had been thrown in a wastepaper basket and all documents and books had been returned to their storage. What had happened was that the chief librarian had listened to the news and heard about the Soviet missiles in Cuba and the US ultimatum. He was, like many others, convinced that a new world war could break out at any time and he had accordingly sounded the emergency alarm. This meant that all valuable documents were immediately brought to safety. As a consequence, the doctoral candidate had to abandon his plan to write the thesis (pers. comm., Gustaf Trotzig, 2008\(^1\)). As an academic it is easy to understand the despair he must have felt, and it is an illustrative example of how the Missile Crisis affected people on a personal level all over the world. We are happy to note that Odenius eventually (1973) was awarded an honorary doctorate.

Another story about the Missile Crisis is told by Petter Ljunggren, who at the time was a 12-year-old boy living with his family in the city of Halmstad in south-west Sweden. The threat that the Cold War could change into a real one was very obvious even before the crisis. Every household in Sweden had received a leaflet with information on what to do if there was war, and in all the gateways in Halmstad there were maps of how to evacuate the city. Petter used to fantasize about how he saved the prettiest girl in his class from the biggest threat of all – the nuclear bomb. The Missile Crisis made the fear of evacuation and war feel closer than ever before. Petter’s father hurried on his bicycle to the local sports shop where he...
bought rucksacks, rain suits, rubber boats, sleeping bags, and thermoses for all the family before these goods were sold out. After barely two weeks the crisis was over and all the equipment ended up in the attic. But the children had now received more new things than they had wished for at Christmas-time. In the following years there was a lot of outdoor life, which was fortunately in a very different context than was feared when the equipment was bought (pers. comm., Petter Ljunggren, 2008).

These stories about the Missile Crisis as experienced from a Swedish perspective can, of course, be viewed as anecdotes, just like the stories told by local people in Santa Cruz de los Pinos. But an anecdotal mapping of the past is, as the American literature scholar Joel Fineman (1989) has suggested, an alternative to the ‘big history’ that has occupied historians for such a long time. It is a way to connect the big and the small history, and to give the recent past a human face. Perhaps it is only through the small stories that large processes become apprehensible and really possible to understand (Buchli and Lucas, 2001: 14–15; Burström, 2009).

■ REUSE OF MATERIAL REMAINS

Our excavations have revealed only a small number of finds from the former missile base. The lack of artifacts surprised us and admittedly was somewhat of a disappointment. When the excavations were finished, local people told us that as soon as the Soviet military left the base in early November 1962 the farmers and the people from the village went to the site to look for things that remained. They found boots, cans, coats, field bottles, nylon covers, oil, spades, spoons, timber boards, and empty wooden ammunition boxes. Local farmers also told us that they had cleared the area in the 1960s and 1970s so that cattle would not be injured when trampling on cans, bottles and scrap iron. But still, over a thousand Soviet soldiers were working and living here during a couple of months in 1962 – how could they have left so few traces? We soon discovered, however, that there are material remains from the missile site present almost everywhere in the nearby surroundings.

People in the Cuban countryside live in very modest circumstances, and they have made use of the material left by the Russians in many different ways. One component from the missile base that now appears in new contexts is a kind of perforated iron mat that originally was laid on the ground to improve passability. The mats have been reused in many different ways; for example, as a footbridge to a dwelling house, a barn wall, a bottle holder, and components in a pigsty. At the same street corner in Santa Cruz de los Pinos where it was said that a house had to be pulled down in 1962 to make way for the missile transports, there now stands a small
sandwich shop built of these iron mats. This means that the physical space for this shop and its components are both a direct consequence of the crisis that threatened world peace half a century ago. Of course, this insight does not alter the ‘big history’ of the Missile Crisis, but it is an illustrative example of how the past is constantly and materially present in people’s everyday life and calls for attention (Olivier, 2001).

Other examples of reuse include fence posts and stones taken from the barracks floor and laid on the ground as pavement, and concrete arches taken from the demolished missile hangar and used as a cattle fold (Figure 7). Another arch is broken into pieces in order to make use of the reinforcement bars (Figure 8). This example of how part of a nuclear missile hangar is converted for peaceful civilian use lends us almost biblical associations: ‘They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks’ (Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3).

The reinforcement bars extracted from the concrete arches have been reused as building material. The remains of the arch, from which the iron had been taken, consist of small pieces of concrete left lying on the ground. Many of them have imprints from the reinforcement bars and they resemble fossils from creatures living millions of years ago in some distant geological epoch. But they are instead fossils of the Cold War (Figure 9). It is a peculiar feeling to hold one of these in your hand and draw your fingers over the imprint’s angular grooves: it makes the Missile Crisis feel both very close and very distant. But the fossils also give a feeling of hope;

Figure 7  Concrete arches reused as a cattle fold. Photo: Mats Burström
they are a reminder that, faced with the threat of Armageddon, the world came to its senses.

It is tempting to think that the battering of the concrete arch to pieces and the many reuses of material from the Soviet missile base are symbolically motivated. These actions could be interpreted as a kind of revenge for

**Figure 8** An arch broken into pieces in search of iron. Photo: Mats Burström
the wrongs that people feel they suffered in 1962. On a local level some people had to leave and abandon their homes, and on a national level Cuba was neglected in the negotiations between the superpowers. We have, however, found very few examples of such symbolic motives. The main reason for the extensive reuse of material from the missile base is, to all appearances, instead a shortage of goods in the Cuban countryside. People simply use whatever material they can find. Still, to us as archaeologists the symbolic dimension of the reuse seems obvious. Our view has probably influenced locals and they may now actually look at the old Soviet material in a different way than before.

**EFFECTS AND RESULTS**

Almost half a century has passed since the Missile Crisis threatened to result in a nuclear war, and since the missile base at Santa Cruz de los Pinos was functional. From a human perspective it is already a long time ago. In this article we have discussed how a site that once stood in the center of
the world’s attention has left memories in the form of material remains and in the minds of people living adjacent to it.

In the history of the recent past, well-documented large-scale happenings and meta-narratives dominate over small-scale and more specific histories. This means that something is lost, since the latter histories are usually more tangible and give a human dimension to the past. In this case we have chosen to draw attention and give voice to narratives and memories that are usually left out from ‘big history’. We have also explored how archaeology can initiate a remembering process. It is obvious that material remains from the missile site – both the ones found during excavation and the ones that are being reused in different ways at farmsteads and other places – bring forth memories. To dig in the ground is also to dig in the memories of the recent past. Working together with local inhabitants creates new thoughts, focusing the specific historical happening and its aftermath as well as general questions concerning the writing of history. In this context, archaeology is as much an arena for dialogue and reflection as it is a search for material remains. This also means that the rather low number of artifacts found at the site that can be directly associated with the Missile Crisis is not a problem. It is the low-voiced, from-below histories that are called forth, and the human dimension these give to the history of the Missile Crisis, that are most important.

When we started our fieldwork in Santa Cruz de los Pinos there was no local interest in the missile site as an historical place. This was well in line with the Missile Crisis being a kind of under-communicated part of Cuban history. This has now changed and the former Soviet base is locally recognized as a resource of historical interest as well as a place of economic potential.

The local museum has been renovated and was re-opened in May 2008 with the history of the missile site as an important part of the exhibition. A collection of material about the site has begun; one example is photographs showing Cubans on a picnic at the deserted base in 1963. Since Cubans were not allowed to visit the base when it was in use they were curious to see what the site looked like when the Russians had left. Later, the site was gradually forgotten as people were busy coping with everyday life.

The local government has now discovered the economic potential of the missile site. It lies within range for a one-day visit from Havana and could therefore be of interest to tourists. People all over the world have memories of the Missile Crisis and may want to see one of the sites of focus back then. The old missile site could very well become a World Heritage Site.

The authorities have started to educate some of the small farmers living closest to the site in how to guide visitors and keep watch over the area. Another expression of this new interest in the site is the inauguration of a commemorative plaque, which took place in October 2007 on the 45th
anniversary of the Missile Crisis. The plaque is placed at the site of one of the launch pads.

Our archaeological interest in the former Soviet nuclear missile site initially aroused some surprise and skepticism among academic colleagues and local people in Santa Cruz de los Pinos. At the local level this was probably strengthened by the fact that some of us are foreigners and we were all accompanied by officials. However, to excavate in the intense heat is hard work and this actually helped us to convince people of the sincerity of our interest in how the Missile Crisis was experienced from a local perspective. The presence of officials convinced people that they were allowed to talk about the Missile Crisis. As a result of our digging in the ground, stories of a silenced past have begun to surface. These stories are, of course, influenced by the present context and we may very well have created an interest that was not there before.

Undoubtedly, more material remains need to be uncovered and more voices need to be heard in order to get a more fully down-to-earth perspective on the Missile Crisis. But let us summarize the most important results we have achieved so far:

■ New knowledge has been produced about the precise locations of various structures of the missile base in Santa Cruz de los Pinos and the reuse of material remains.

■ Using archaeological fieldwork as an arena for dialogue with local people has, together with the material remains found, triggered memories and stories about how the Missile Crisis was experienced from a local perspective. These histories from below give a new and human dimension to the history of the crisis. It has also generated important discussions about the writing of history in general.

■ The former Soviet nuclear missile bases in Cuba are now beginning to be recognized as sites of historical importance both locally and nationally.

■ A local project is underway to take care of and develop the former missile site in Santa Cruz de los Pinos as a heritage site.

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Notes

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2 Petter Ljunggren, Educational Manager, the Museum of National Antiquities, Stockholm.

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