

KATSAUS

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## **Landscapes of Conflict: Comparative Archaeology of WWII Airfields in the Czech Republic and Finland**

### **Introduction**

The study of WWII through material culture has proven potential to formulate a more complete picture of wartime. Due to the varying preservation of wartime sources and their biased perspectives, material culture offers a unique viewpoint for investigating wartime events, locations, and people. As the research potential of these wartime archaeological sites is becoming better understood, new research projects are launched in Finland and abroad.

In 2025, the research project, *The Land Gone Wild: Archaeology and Transdisciplinary Research of Resilience Strategies in the 20th Century*, was launched in the Czech Republic. The project, named after a book by Czech author Jiří Stránský, focuses on the transdisciplinary research of materiality, landscape, and resilience strategies of the 20th century. One main partner of this interdisciplinary project is the Department of Archaeology of the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen. The department represents one of the largest university institutions focused on teaching and research in archaeology in the Czech Republic and is also one of the leading institutions developing the new 20th-century archaeology sub-discipline in a broad international context.

The research project brings together over 40 researchers from various universities. One of the subprojects within the research initiative focuses specifically on the material culture of modern conflicts. This part, led by Tomas Pancíř and Pavel Vařeka from the University of West Bohemia, involves the study of war materiality and affected landscapes from the

Second World War period to the Cold War era. An important area of interest is the history of Czech and Finnish airfields during World War II. The comparative study, comprising archaeological fieldwork, archival research, and interviews, began in 2025 and will continue until 2028. The research is conducted in cooperation with Teemu Väisänen from the University of Turku.

## Historical background

In March 1939, the German army occupied Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia (former Czechoslovakia). As a result, this territory was incorporated into the German war effort. Known as the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the area was far from the front lines and, for a long time, remained unthreatened. Thus, the territory was suitable for wartime industries such as armament factories and refineries. Numerous anti-aircraft defenses were deployed in the territory to guard these important factories and the chemical industry of Reichswerke Hermann Göring (Čech 2020). The German Luftwaffe also maintained an extensive system of warning and reporting services, such as in Dubné in the České Budějovice region, and Würzburg-Riese radars around Pilsen.

The Luftwaffe prioritized occupying and utilizing all available airfield bases immediately after the occupation of the Czech Republic. They initiated extensive modernizations, transforming pre-war aviation sites into functional military bases. The airspace of the protectorate fell under the Luftgau-Kommando XVII (Air District), managed from Vienna. During the war, many of the airfields used by the Luftwaffe served not only as military bases but also as training grounds for new pilots, such as the České Budějovice airport. The empire's air defense was further ensured in 1943–1944 mainly by Messerschmitt Bf 109 and Focke-Wulf Fw 190 fighters operating from the Czech airfield (Rajlich 1997).

Towards the end of the war, all airfields became targets of air raids. The German occupation ended on 9 May 1945 with the arrival of the Soviet and American armies and the Prague uprising. After the war, numerous aircraft wrecks, equipment, weapons, and ammunition left behind by the German army remained scattered on the runways and surrounding areas (e.g., Pecha & Vondra 2006: 110–112). Eventually, the air-

fields were cleared and repurposed for military or civilian aviation, but a significant portion of the wartime material culture remained buried in the terrain of the airfields (figure 1).

## Conflict archaeology in the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, the 19th–20th centuries represent the last period that has not yet received systematic archaeological attention. A newly developing specialization, called the archaeology of modernity or contemporary archaeology, is attempting to fill this gap (see Vařeka 2013; Krajčic et al. 2017). Previously, Czech archaeologists rarely considered wartime relics during surveys or excavations, and more contemporary finds were typically only briefly mentioned if discovered at prehistoric or Medieval sites.

Similarly, aviation archaeology has only recently begun to receive attention (Rak 2013, 2014; Pancíř 2020, 2024; Vladař 2020; Seleši & Hasil 2025). However, over the past decade, sites of former German airfields have gained more importance and have become the focus of research projects and rescue archaeological works (e.g., Knápek & Rous 2014; Pancíř 2020). One ongoing project has been led by Tomas Pancíř at an airport near České Budějovice (John & Pancíř 2024). Archaeological re-



Figure 1. Concrete remains of the former aircraft manufacturing facility, *Flugzeugwerk Eger*, along with the related shooting range and airfield runway near Cheb, Czech Republic. Photos: T. Pancíř.

search at the airfield has not been limited to remains from one era but has considered the entire history of the area. The similarities between this airport and Finnish airfields prompted cooperation with Teemu Väisänen, a partnership that began in 2022 and continues with the new project (Väisänen et al. 2023).

## The Land Gone Wild project and research plans

The Land Gone Wild sub-project, led by Pancíř and Vařeka, focuses on three main areas: events and sites at the end of the Second World War, post-war militarism during the Cold War era, and aerial warfare from 1939 to 1945. As part of the latter focus, airfields, anti-aircraft defenses, and other Luftwaffe sites in the Czech Republic and Finland are studied through surveys and excavations. The goal is to compare findings from airfields in both countries to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Luftwaffe operations and their adaptation to varying conditions, such as arctic and urban environments.



Figure 2. Charles Pauley and Tomas Pancíř at Kemijärvi airfield observing abandoned barrels for calcium chloride made by Solvay in Belgium. Photo: T. Väisänen.

Whereas previous research was primarily non-destructive, the new project and its funding allow for archaeological excavations. In the Czech Republic, research focuses on the airfields of Cheb, Budweis, Klecany, and Bory-Pilsen. In Finland, the research focuses particularly on the airfields of Pori, Kemi, and Kemijärvi, which differ in location, environment, usage, and preservation (figure 2). In Pori, archaeological excavations began in collaboration with the local community in 2020, but the site still holds significant research potential regarding material culture (Väisänen et al. 2021). Other aforementioned Finnish airfields have not seen previous archaeological excavations.

Previous cooperation has revealed various similarities between Luftwaffe sites in the Czech Republic and Finland, especially in material culture and construction types. Direct connections between Finland and the Czech Republic also existed, as several German Luftwaffe units operated in both regions. Preliminary research has uncovered signs of mobility between the areas in material culture. For example, pieces of “Carlsbad Water” bottles from Karlovy Vary were found within the German POW camp at Pori airfield. Similarly, Nordfront Crosses, as well as Laplandfront and Petsamo–Rovaniemi commemorative badges, have been discovered at various German sites in the Czech Republic (figure 3).



Figure 3: Commemorative Nordfront cross and Laplandfront badge, found at the prisoner of war camp in Ejpvovice. Photo: T. Pancíř.

The wartime remnants in both countries also face similar threats to preservation. These structures are not automatically protected, leaving them vulnerable to destruction by land use, forestry operations, and looting. Thus, one aim of the project is to promote the study of wartime sites in both countries and raise awareness about their significance and the threats they face.

## Conclusion

By studying and comparing the operations of the Luftwaffe in the territories of two countries, we can form a more complete picture of the Luftwaffe's activities outside of Germany and its adaptation to different conditions. This can be examined, for example, by looking at the similarities and differences in building types, the development of airfield infrastructure, and the diet of soldiers. Through archival materials and interviews, the aim is also to investigate the nature of the relationship between the Germans and the local residents in both countries.

The research results will be published in several planned peer-reviewed articles on the subject. In addition, there are plans for popular publications, public events, and museum exhibitions related to the topic. By involving the general public in the research, the goal is to highlight the potential of wartime studies and promote the preservation of war-related historical sites for future generations.

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