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Why Norway is restoring its Cold War military bunkers

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Mark Piesing



Norwegian Armed Forces

Bunkers like the ones at Bardufoss can keep expensive fighter planes safe from attacks by drones (Credit: Norwegian Armed Forces)

Norway's proximity to the USSR during the Cold War led to it building many military bunkers – some of them vast secret bases for planes and ships. Tensions with Russia have brought the bunkers back into focus.

Tourists in their hundreds of thousands visit northern Norway each year. But there is a secret world they never see. For hidden away in mountain caverns are jet fighters and nuclear submarines.

Norway is a land with many bunkers. At the peak of the Cold War, the sparsely populated, mountainous country had around 3,000 underground facilities where its armed forces and allies could hide and make life difficult for any invader. Dating back to when the Scandinavian country was part of Hitler's Atlantic Wall during World War Two and even earlier, their existence was barely known to the Norwegian public. Now as a European war engulfs eastern Ukraine, Norway is reactivating two of their most iconic underground structures of the Cold War.

Close to Norway's border with Russia north of the Arctic Circle, the hangars of the Bardufoss Air Station and the naval base at Olavsværn feel like they belong in a spy film, with their rough rock walls, gleaming concrete and military equipment. Carved out of a mountain side, protected by around 900ft (275m) of tough gabbro rock, the Olasværn base is particularly evocative with its 3,000ft-long (909m) exit tunnel complete with massive blast door.



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Some of the bunkers in Norway date from the country's occupation by Germany in World War Two (Credit: Alamy)

Why are these huge bunkers needed today? The Soviet Union – the reason they were built in the first place – no longer exists. Does it really make sense to pour money into such expensive structures?

In the publicity shots for the reactivation of Bardufoss hangars, the Lockheed Martin fighter – the F-35 Lightning II – perches menacingly like a bird of prey under the spot lights of the hangar's arched roof. Opened in 1938, the air station was once used by German fighters protecting the giant battleship Tirpitz while it was anchored in a nearby fjord.

After the war, the Royal Norwegian Air Force then used its mountain hangars to protect its fighter planes from a possible Soviet attack. These hangars included everything the planes and their pilots needed, such as fuel storage, weapon storage, space for maintaining the aircraft systems, and crew areas. Then around 40 years ago it was closed down and mothballed.

Now, Bardufoss looks like it may be needed once more.

“ All it takes is one look at the map to explain why Olavsvern naval base was built

The role of the reactivated base which has had structural and equipment upgrades is to help the "resilience and survivability" of Norway's F-35s in the face of a Russian attack. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has shown the world how vulnerable expensive military aircraft like these \$80m-\$110m (£64m to £80m) F-35s can be when on the ground, particularly to attacks by "kamikaze" drones that can cost as little as \$300 (£230).

Instead of placing tyres on wings or constructing hangars out of wire mesh, as the Russians have done in Ukraine, the drone threat can be limited by dispersing targets to many different locations, or, even better, by keeping the aircraft safe in hardened shelters – the hardest of which is a mountain.

All it takes is one look at the map to explain why Olavsvern naval base was built.

Located close to where the Norwegian Sea meets the Barents Sea, the 400 miles (650km) or so between Norway's coastline, Bear Island and Svalbard is sometimes called "the Bear Gap" because this was, and still is, a choke point for Russian submarines and warships heading out to the Atlantic.



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Norway's military is reacting to heightened tension on the country's border with Russia (Credit: Alamy)

Construction of the naval base mostly occurred in stages from the 1950s onwards in response to the buildup of the Soviets' Northern Fleet, with the purpose of helping to turn a bear gap into a bear trap. Costing around \$450m (£360m), the base – with its underground command centre, storage, deep-water dock, dry dock, and exit tunnel – was such a massive undertaking for Norway that Nato had to fund a great deal of it. The Soviet Union had collapsed by the time it was fully completed.

But it was no white elephant. Despite the slow thawing of the Cold War, Nato vessels still used it as a staging post for missions in the frigid Arctic Ocean.

In 2009 the Norwegian parliament narrowly voted to close down the top-secret Olavsværn base despite the growing threat from Russia; and in 2013 it was sold to private investors far below market value at around £7m. Its tunnels were filled with caravans and vintage cars. The new owner allowed two Russian research ships and Russian fishing vessels to use the once closely guarded facility. Russian media even spread misinformation that the company that bought the base was part-owned by Russians.

“ The reason for the reactivation of these bases is simple: Russia

In 2020, WilNor Governmental Services, with close links to the Norwegian military, bought a majority of the company. Since then it has started to repair and upgrade the site and there has been an increasing military presence at the base, and the US Navy is interested in basing their nuclear submarines there as well.

The reason for the reactivation of these bases is simple: Russia.

Norway's security concerns didn't start in 2022 – when Russia invaded Ukraine – or in 2014, when it invaded Crimea, but even earlier. "In around 2006-2008, there was a confluence of things. There was a lot of investment going into Russia's Northern Fleet," says Andreas Østhagen, a senior research fellow at Fridtjof Nansen Institute, a Norwegian foundation, "along with the resumption of Russian military exercises in the Arctic for the first time since the Cold War, and Russia's growing interest in the exploitation of Arctic resources".

"Putin's Russia is not the Soviet Union," Østhagen adds. "But from a Norwegian security point of view there are the same issues. How do you deter Russia and, if you end up in a war, how do you fight Russia?"



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The Olavsværn base was used to keep submarines hidden from Soviet satellites (Credit: Alamy)

The Norwegians aren't the only ones reactivating Cold War bases. The Russians have also in recent years reactivated around 50 Cold War bases of varying kinds across the Arctic. The Swedish navy has returned to its underground naval base on Muskö island, about 25 miles (40km) from Stockholm.

Other countries have gone further than simply reactivating bunkers built decades before; they are building new underground structures. China has built a massive new underground submarine base on Hainan Island in the contested South China Sea. It is also building a vast new underground command centre near the capital, Beijing. Iran has built its own underground naval base in the Persian Gulf and showed off its "underground missile city."

"The psychology of nuclear bunkers is really, really powerful," says independent cold war researcher, and military blogger known as Sir Humphrey, the blogging name of the author of the Thin Pinstriped Line blog, which studies the Cold War. "I think they are deeply rooted into our psyche and our understanding of the Cold War, particularly of a Dr Strangelove command centre with an out-of-control general sitting there."

“ The big challenge in reactivating those that remain would be the cost – Paul Ozorak

"Placing boats and subs [and planes] in tunnels can still be a great way to protect them from a vertical aerial bombing attack," says Paul Ozorak, author of Underground Structures of the Cold War, "even if bunker-busters are used, if vulnerabilities are addressed, through for example the use of blast doors".

But countries such as the UK may be reluctant to follow Norway's lead in reactivating underground bases or building new ones because of the vast expense, says Ozorak. Many of the Cold War underground structures in the UK and other Nato countries have been sold off to become museums, or even nightclubs. Some have been destroyed. At least one has been sealed shut. Many more will have been flooded and be physically unusable, the concrete rotten and no longer blast-proof.

"The big challenge in reactivating those that remain would be the cost," says Ozorak. "In many cases, these bunkers were stripped of all their equipment. To reinstall this equipment and to re-lay communication cables would be very expensive. To re-acquire them would also be expensive."



Norwegian Armed Forces

Bunkers like the ones at Bardufoss can keep expensive fighter planes safe from attacks by drones (Credit: Norwegian Armed Forces)

There is also the problem that if they have been deactivated like Olavsvern then their security may have been compromised by foreign intelligence services, even if they haven't had visits from Russian survey ships.

"There are also limited operational benefits of a site that everyone knows exists and that has been a target for 60 years, and where satellite imagery can now spot the ventilation shafts and entry points," says Sir Humphrey.

"They were designed to be blast-proof against a [nuclear] bomb going off nearby," he adds, "and not someone dropping a GPS-guided bomb down its ventilation shaft".

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However, in the UK, the [RAF Air Command bunker](#) built during the Cold War in Buckinghamshire is still in use, as are the bunkers that make up [Northwood Headquarters](#), a military headquarters in north-west London, rebuilt in 2006-2011. [MOD Corsham](#) is now a secret site for military communications built on top of the vast [Corsham network of tunnels](#), which was the location of the UK government's nuclear war headquarters, some of which are [still used by the military](#). Mothballed sites can be reactivated without the public knowing.

The British Cabinet Office, on national security grounds, started to [reclassify and withdraw](#) documents on nuclear war planning that had been released after the Cold War had ended.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine shocked many people. "In the end, if you are afraid of a surprise attack the natural inclination is to go underground," says Ozorak.

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