

Leftovers

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Once, as I traced the dotted black line encircling my hometown of Kaunas¹ on an old city map, a vivid childhood memory resurfaced. The scene suddenly took me back to a spot halfway between my elementary school and my family home – a small, unremarkable hill overgrown with bushes and weeds, which also housed our local convenience store and a neighbourhood VHS rental shop. It was a transitional non-place where children would gather to kick a ball around and hang out in an environment that felt somewhat like nature.

That particular day, we decided to play a game of “forts” (*būstinė*).² Even though we were just a small bunch of seven-year-olds, we approached it with the utmost seriousness. Ready for the mission, we met early in the morning. The first order of business was to make a list of necessary materials. After dividing the tasks, we agreed that one group would trespass into a nearby warehouse, while the other would raid a residential construction site. We split up and gathered our loot: a few wooden pallets to serve as the floor, a pile of white silicate bricks to form a solid foundation, and, finally, dirt to bind everything together. We returned to our base camp and set to work, spending the entire afternoon under the blazing sun, eventually assembling the core structure of our outpost. Tired and hungry, we decided to call it a day and agreed to continue the next morning.

By the time we returned, word had already spread. The older kids from the neighbourhood had discovered and destroyed our construction site. Just like that, our base had been taken. What began as an innocent attempt to carve out a shelter—a desire for a safe space, something of

¹ The name Kaunas likely derived from the adjective *kaunus*, meaning “one who likes to fight, to clash.”

² “Forts” (*būstinė*) is a children’s game where a base or fortification is built from found materials or established in natural hiding places, such as abandoned buildings. The goal is to capture the opponent’s base and defend your own.



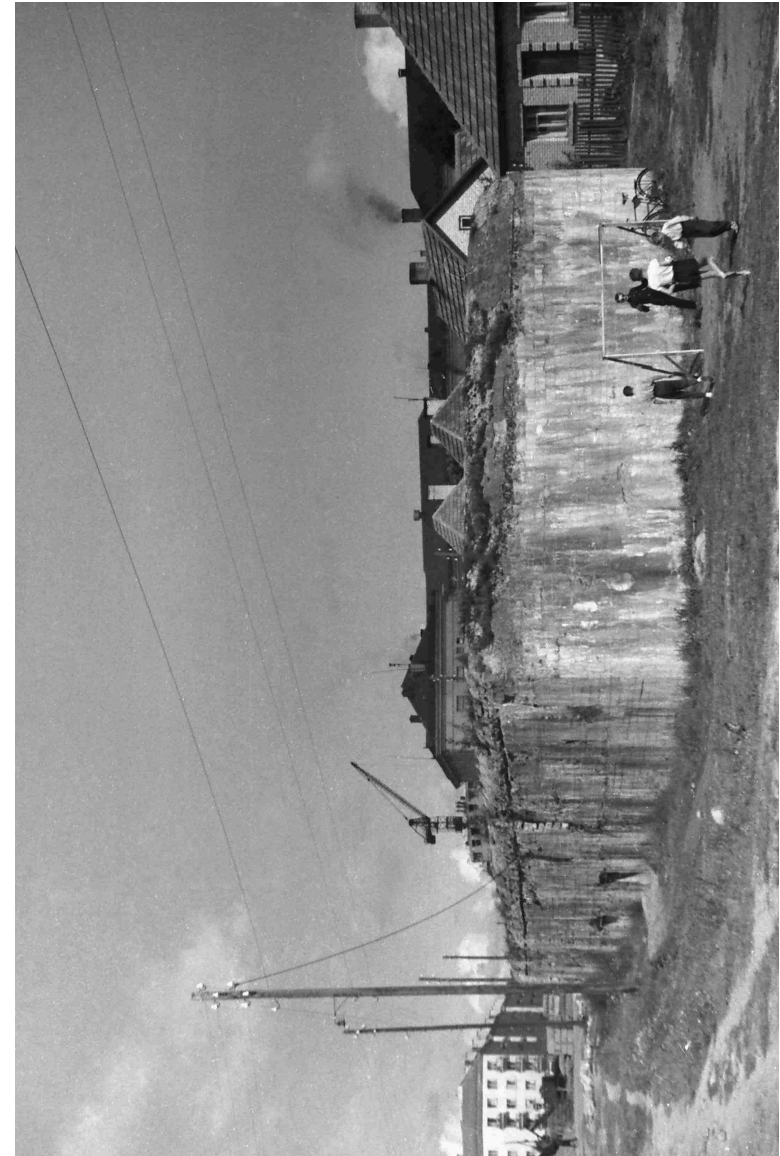
Ruined fortifications of the Kaunas Fortress, 1915. Courtesy of the Vytautas the Great War Museum.

our own—ended as a painful and harsh lesson in territoriality. For the first time in my life, this event drew a clear line separating “us” from “them,” setting a precedent for conflict and planting a lasting sense of insecurity that stayed with me for many years. Kaunas was no longer the safe haven I had known growing up under the protection of my parents. It had become a place where I had to pick sides, clearly define boundaries, decide on tactics, and abide by unwritten rules.

Wanting to delve deeper into this memory, I began looking for documents and archival photographs of the area. In the Kaunas City Museum archive, I came across a series of 1960s photographs by Stanislovas Lukošius. Working under a government commission, he documented locations marked for major change—houses soon to be demolished, streets to be laid out, neighbourhoods to be built, and so on. The museum collection contains thousands of images capturing urban spaces in flux. Although the area I was looking for had changed almost beyond recognition, there it was—the hill from my childhood memories, flickering in a black-and-white photograph. To my surprise, in front of it, a small concrete bunker rose from the ground, indicating what was unmistakably a military installation. The dotted black line on the map hadn’t simply outlined the city’s boundaries—it was a marker for a defensive line.³ By pure chance, we have built our base right on top of an actual Kaunas fortress. Although the reenactment wasn’t intentional, I began to question whether it was merely coincidence—or whether some other force was at play: a ghostly, historical presence embedded in the muddy soil of the hill, overlapping timelines separated by the century. At that point, it raised more questions than answers. This moment marked the beginning of an investigation and a growing obsession that would guide me for the next four years—this was perhaps the first time my curiosity in World War I was sparked. But this wasn’t an easy task for a couple of reasons. First of all, historically speaking, it’s a complex subject that stretches beyond my usual area of expertise—and I want to be clear about this—I am not a historian by training.

In this text, I aim to share my personal reflections and observations, rather than present historical evidence or claim definitive truths of any kind. Secondly, those century-old events have left no living witnesses, making it necessary to rely entirely on the fragile testimonies of nearly decomposed artefacts, scattered documents and fact-heavy

³ General Plan of Kaunas Fortress, 1912, Kaunas IX Fort Museum.



Photograph of children playing football near a former bunker, now Talkos avenue, Stanislovas Lukošius, 1960-1965. Courtesy of Kaunas City Museum.

books. This transformed the task mostly into a phenomenological one, complicated by the intangible, entangled nature of space and time, and the absence of clear instructions for how to unravel it.

Besides, despite our constant vows of “never again,” the political tensions of our time (for example, Russia’s war against Ukraine, Israel’s ongoing occupation of Palestine) continue to build.⁴ The broader resurgence of bloodlust around the world reaches us every day through the media and the half-whispered words of friends and colleagues, stirring new anxieties and disappointments, evoking an uncanny sense of history repeating itself.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Kaunas was unwillingly converted into one of the largest fortresses of the Russian Empire—a so-called “first-class” fortress. Twelve defensive forts were planned around the city, and as the construction progressed, the number of imperial troops quickly surpassed the local population. The city’s spatial and cultural landscape was about to be reshaped permanently. To convey the scale of this transformation, it’s worth noting that in the mid-19th century, Kaunas had a population of around 20,000. However, by 1897, this number had surged to over 70,000, with only about 6% of people identifying as Lithuanians.⁵ The narrow streets of this once small provincial town no longer could fit the needs of the imperial power, leading to the construction of a new network of roads and railways. Numerous urban planning regulations were introduced, including laws restricting the height of new buildings. Barracks, arsenals, and fortified structures took over entire neighbourhoods, while trenches and defensive lines cut deep scars into the ground, enclosing the city and severely restricting movement in and out.

Built over three decades and intended to withstand a siege for over six months, the ageing fortifications fell to the Germans in just eleven days. Historians suggest multiple contributing factors to this rapid collapse, but one of the main reasons was the low morale among the soldiers—most of those defending the fortress had little desire to die for a distant Tsar.

⁵ First General Census of the Population of the Russian Empire, 1897.

⁴ The phrase “never again” was used as a post-Holocaust slogan after World War II by survivors and later popularized in global political discourse as a vow against future genocide and war in general.

After the First World War, this militaristic complex gradually began to integrate into the fabric of everyday life. Railways were repurposed to support the factories of the newly established Lithuanian state. Former imperial administration buildings were emptied to make way for emerging local institutions, while Orthodox churches were converted into Catholic ones. Some of the forts, too, found new uses—the VII Fort,⁶ for example, became a state archive. During the interwar period, in a country still struggling with poverty, old structures were repurposed in whatever ways people could manage—looting fortification premises and even inhabiting it.⁷ However, many sites remained unused, slowly decaying in the open air, offering shelter to outcasts and stray animals, continuously transforming into ruins.

But these were not romantic ruins that promised grandeur, authenticity or pride. Nor were they objects of nostalgia, as traditionally understood—like those depicted by 18th-century Italian painters.⁸ These were the ruins of modern failure, abandoned here by a defeated empire. A place full of trauma, vast fields of rubble, monoliths, empty architectural structures, alteration in the genetic code, all left to rot and decay, shedding their original meaning as they sink into the landscape and merge with the present. Leftovers that will remain here forever, yet are inevitably destined to be forgotten.

Philosopher Dylan Trigg’s text, *The Place of Trauma: Memory, Hauntings, and the Temporality of Ruins*, explores the connection between ruins and the obscure, nonverbal sensations they evoke, using a phenomenological point of view.⁹ To put it simply, he suggests that ruins embody voids—spaces of absence filled with the weight of what once was. These voids are not empty, rather, they carry the enduring impact of loss and destruction. They confront us with the fragmented, haunting nature of traumatic pasts, evoking ghostly presences that disrupt our

⁶ Although I do not intend to expand on the period of the Second World War in this brief overview, I must mention that during the Nazi occupation, some of the forts were used for torturing and killing Jewish people, including building gas chambers in VII Fort.

⁷ “Butų kolonijos fortune likviduojamos [Apartment Colonies in the Forts Are Being Liquidated],” *Lietuvos Žinios*, July 3, 1935, 6.

⁸ For 18th century examples of romanticised ruins, see paintings by Giovanni Paolo Panini and etchings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi.

⁹ Dylan Trigg, “The Place of Trauma: Memory, Hauntings, and the Temporality of Ruins,” *Memory Studies* 2, no. 3 (2009): 87–101.



A building of the Kaunas Fortress complex, converted into a shed or barn, 1920-1930. Courtesy of the Vytautas the Great War Museum.



Ruins of the Kaunas Fortress, screenshot from video, 2024. Courtesy of Lukas Mykolaitis.

usual sense of time and place, making the past feel vividly present. For Trigg, ruins act as material witnesses to trauma—sometimes, due to the impact of the traumatic event, even more reliable than the testimonies of the survivors—bearing memories that contradict normative historical linearity. Perhaps our bodily sensors can help us understand these places better than our intellectual efforts?

Yet the problem with this kind of thinking might lie in the fact that it relies entirely on individual sensitivity and fails to explain how to distinguish or classify one site from another, since each traumatic event, whether collective, historical, or personal, carries its own complexities and nuances.

Let's say someone is visiting one of these World War I sites in Kaunas. If they are already familiar with the history, the experience will likely be powerful and moving. But if they arrive without knowing the context, the setting might initially seem deceptively ordinary—perhaps even idyllic and relaxing. Imagine a light breeze blowing, warm evening sunlight filtering through the leaves, and a couple of dogs playing somewhere in the distance. At first glance, the surroundings appear natural—a hill, a tree, a pond. And only upon closer observation does it become apparent that the landscape has been shaped by a human hand; the hill is actually a grass-covered bunker, the tree line a defensive barrier, the pond a trench carved into the earth. It is at this very moment that an awkward tension may begin to creep in—something that had been lurking beneath the surface all along.

For ruins, such a return to nature could mark a new and perhaps an even hopeful phase in their existence. In this stage, they are no longer passive structures frozen in time; they act and are acted upon, gradually transforming into something autonomous, something closer to nature, until they become almost non-ruin-like. Building on this theory, and drawing primarily from Bruno Latour's concept of hybrids¹⁰ (entities that do not fit into a single category, typically combining biological, cultural, economic, and political characteristics), Polish author Beata Frydryczak argues that ruins are often mistakenly understood solely as a cultural phenomenon, situated between the past and the present, and gaining meaning only through the discourses of history and heritage.¹¹

¹⁰ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991

¹¹ Beata Frydryczak, "Ruins: Between Past and Present, Between Culture and Nature," *Eidos: A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 7, no. 2 (2023): 9–16



Owl Hill, construction of Kaunas Art School, 1922–1923. Courtesy of Lithuanian Aviation Museum.



Kaunas Art School students standing in front of the Iron Fence, Veronika Šleivytė, 1931. Courtesy of M.K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art.

If ruins were instead viewed from a perspective that places them between nature and culture, a new possibility would emerge—one that rejects the melancholic and romantic gaze in favour of an approach that sees ruins as closer to nature. According to Frydryczak, this view aligns more closely with the principles of cultural studies, in which ruins are regarded as “nature–culture”—an idea that helps to define their ontological status.

There are several notable cases of nature–culture hybrids among the remnants of the Kaunas Fortress. One of them can be found at Owl Hill, located in the very centre of Kaunas. In this instance, however, the process is reversed: it was nature that was later restructured by human activity. Originally, it is a geological formation created tens of thousands of years ago, when the two rivers (Neris and Nemunas) pushed a hillock into place, creating a spur and making it the highest point in the area. Like from a medieval castle, one could observe the surrounding landscape stretching far into the distance. Unsurprisingly, during the Russian imperial occupation, a defensive battery was established on the hill.

Today, the spur is covered with neatly maintained grass, some long-standing trees, and a couple of buildings from the old Kaunas Art School, which raised several generations of notable artists. Since the beginning of the school's construction in the late 1910s, almost all traces of former fortifications have been either dismantled or buried under the ground—except for one relic still haunting the top of the hill—the Iron Fence. As a local, I walked past it countless times, although I never suspected its militaristic origins.

The Iron Fence was originally designed to protect against infantry attacks and, at one point, encircled the entire town. After the First World War ended, the fence was dismantled and repurposed, surrounding new areas and placing nearly every layer of society behind the iron bars: churches, schools, universities, museums, parks, sports stadiums, private homes, the railway station—even the Palace of the Constituent Assembly, a building where Lithuania's first constitution was adopted. The fence not only redefined the urban space; it quietly embedded itself into the city's everyday life, present during the moments when the most consequential decisions were being made. Despite its scale, historians have not attributed much significance to it, and only a few passing references, mostly limited to technical details, can be found in historical sources.¹²

¹² Arvydas Pociūnas, *Kauno tvirtovės gynyba 1915 metais* (Vilnius: Generolo Jono Žemaičio Lietuvos karo akademija, 2008).



Remnants of the Iron Fence in Kaunas Botanical Garden, screenshot from video, 2024.
Courtesy of Lukas Mykolaitis.

It was my grandfather who first told me about the rusting remnants of the fence. He also showed me a section of it that lies just around the corner from our family home, hiding in the thick greenery of the ancient Žaliakalnis district slopes. He shared a story from his childhood – how he and some neighbourhood boys once climbed this fence to grab a few apples from the garden, but were caught and severely beaten by the owner for trespassing. According to my grandfather, the same man (a high-ranking military officer at the time) was later sentenced to life in prison for shooting another man. This story struck me personally: a few years ago, just meters away from the infamous officer's home, I also had a gun pointed at me. Two shots were fired, but I was lucky enough to escape without any physical harm.

The seemingly far-fetched claim I made when I first started this project – that fear and a sense of insecurity were somehow transmitted into the psyche of local residents through the old war remnants – hills, ruins, and fences – began to feel increasingly real. If we trust phenomenologists or our intuition, those events are embedded in the very surfaces and return as strong repetitions or hauntings each time someone triggers them – whether consciously (as during historical research) or unconsciously (like when we played forts as children).

After years of gathering clues and studying maps, I set out to trace the dotted black line again – slowly walking the perimeter myself. After all, the only way to truly understand a spatial realm is to step into it. Much like the childhood hill where I used to play, the entire territory of Kaunas has now become my playground. In the spirit of Stanislovas Lukošius, I recorded my journey on a video camera, aiming to create a collection – an unprecedented archive of these places. The archive is not ready to be shared yet, rather, it's intended as a time capsule for the future, preserving a digital record in case someone with similar interests or intentions is drawn to this historical phenomenon a hundred years from now.

While walking through the city, I discovered many diverse locations still surrounded by the same Iron Fence. Among them were car parks, car workshops, factory grounds, a botanical garden, a church, and even a private circus. As people carried on with their lives, its sharp shadow continued to linger.

While walking through the dark corridors of the forts, I sensed a warped timeline accompanying me, every single time sending a shiver down my spine. However, by carefully listening to the historical

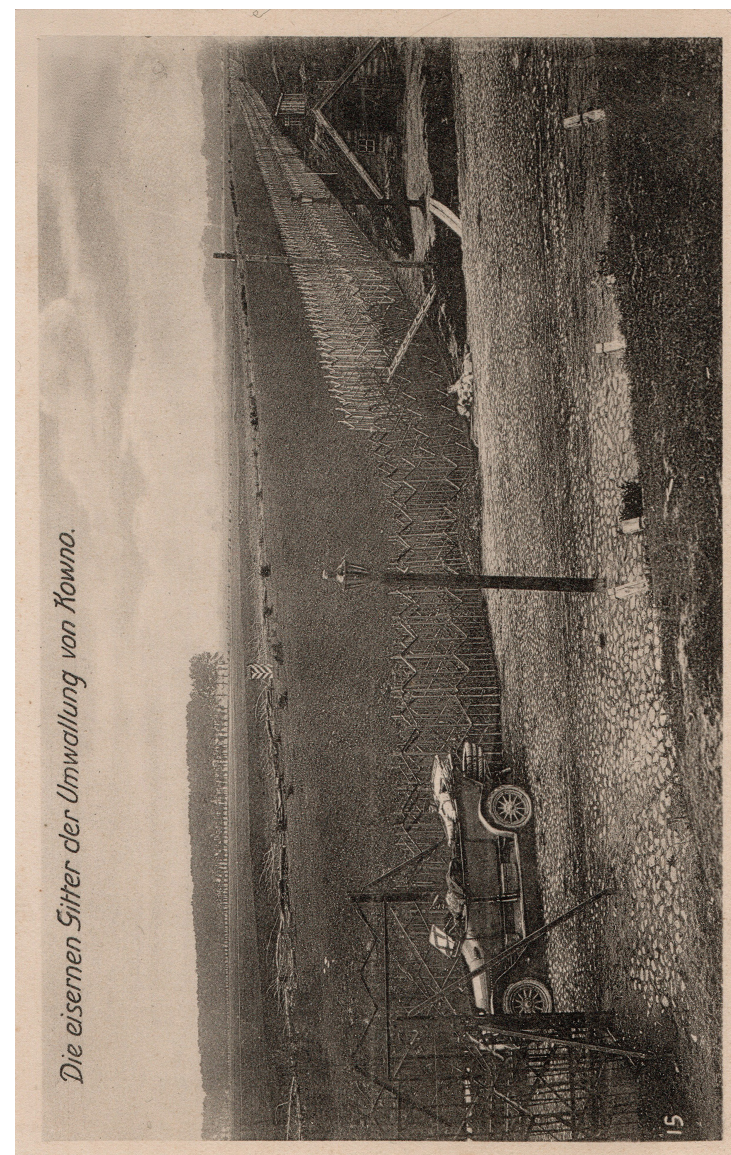
reverberations endlessly echoing in the tunnels, I began to feel more at ease; they no longer frighten me.

Tracing the exact beginning of my project is as difficult as re-constructing the historical events themselves, and since my relationship with the city can never be truly completed or finished, there is no planned ending for it either. The city is in a constant flux, and even without taking geopolitical threats or climate shifts into account, the change is an inevitable part of its cycle. At the height of its economic growth, Kaunas is developing and expanding rapidly. Gentrification is transforming historic buildings into shops, cafés, private schools, offices, and lofts, edging ever closer to the former outskirts and signalling the dawn of a new era—one that seeks to cleanse a past marked by trauma and shame.

Yet, while the leftovers of the past are constantly being covered up, reclaimed by nature, and actively fading from our memory, these processes are never one-sided. As modern housing projects emerge in one area, layers of forgotten sediment are exposed elsewhere. While the tightening grip of the normative historical narrative grows stronger, new documents buried for decades and centuries are being unearthed. Archives and museums are constantly digitising old photographs and artefacts—waiting for someone’s imagination, curiosity, or childhood memory to set a spark, thus extending their expiration date for another lifetime.

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German postcard. The caption, written in German, reads: “The Iron Gates of Kaunas.” 1915. Courtesy of Lukas Mykolaitis.