

LEKTIO

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## **Deutsches Lager Hanko 1942–1944. The Modern Conflict Archaeology and History of a German Second World War Transition Camp in Hanko, South Finland**

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My journey and love for archaeology started a long time ago in Hanko at the age of seven. It was there that I made my first Second World War finds and conducted my first, admittedly not very scientific field surveys and excavations of Second World War battlefield sites in the late 1960s.

My interest in the history of the Second World War stuck with me throughout the years and helped me to choose where to continue my studies after school. I began studying European history at Åbo Akademi in Turku in 1983 and continued with archaeology at the University of Turku in 1984 and at the University of Helsinki from 1986 onwards.

A turning point in my career as an archaeologist was working at Heureka, the Finnish Science Centre, between 1990 and 1997. There, I learnt the basics of how to communicate scientific research to the public and especially to school students. This orientation towards the public shows in my thesis as well.

In the autumn of 2014 after spending three decades and supervising numerable community excavations, mostly studying the Stone and Iron Age sites, I decided to go full circle, get back to my childhood roots, and try to combine my interest in the history of the Second World War with multidisciplinary archaeological research of the battles and wartime remains of the Hanko front.

I started putting together a research plan and began looking for war historians, archaeologists, archaeology students, and various organisations that I could work with. During a meeting with representatives



Fig. 1. Conflict archaeology fieldwork in progress in the “Entlausungsdorf” area in 2019. Photo: Jan Fast.

from local museums in Hanko in May 2014 I was advised to “maybe take a look” at some German barracks on Cape Tulliniemi that were to be torn down during the upcoming week (Fig. 1).

Today it is almost exactly 10 years and 6 months since my visit to those barracks, which proved to be the last standing remains of the German transition camp ‘Deutsches Lager Hanko’ at the southernmost point of Finland. Even here today I can still remember the eerie but inspiring silence amidst the crumbling barracks on the isolated cape.

With my background in citizen science and pedagogic community archaeology, I decided to reach out to the public and contacted my network of schools/history teachers and journalists, and started a Facebook page, a webpage, and a blog dedicated to communicating my research. I created different opportunities to lecture, conduct interviews, and crowd-source. I also contacted war historians like Oula Silvennoinen and Lasse Laaksonen, both of whom showed an interest in the Second World War Conflict Archaeology and the history of the German transition camp in Hanko, to ask for their advice on how to proceed.

Initially, I was also contacted by Professor Jan-Martti Kaila and photographer Japo Knuutila, who asked me to participate in their project 'Poetic Archaeology', which combined conflict archaeology and photographic art research of the German camp.

The start of the research in 2014 was not as easy as I had expected, and after having documented the structures that were still standing things, it started to get difficult, as the archival sources proved to be extremely scarce.

I turned to the Finnish National Archives and the Bundesarchiv but found very little information about the camp. The archives of 20. Gebirgs-Armee-Oberkommando (AOK 20) proved both difficult and time-consuming to investigate, and it was only after very hard work that some small bits and pieces with information about the camp could be found here. The Hanko harbour archives provided me with important but mostly very general information about the German troop transports on the German cargo ships between 1942 and 1944.

In addition to this, the first year of surveying and documenting the area of the camp showed that archaeological research probably would be equally difficult, as finds from the Second World War period were far and in between or seemed to be totally lacking in many areas of the camp. However, there was to be light at the end of the tunnel soon.

Careful field surveys of the former campground, research of maps and air surveillance photos, followed by coordinated metal detecting surveys with expert metal detectorist Lasse Nyman, finally changed the difficult



Fig. 2. Then and now. German "Gebirgsjäger" performing their morning duties on the camp beach in 1943 and the exact same spot during the 2017 excavation season. Photo: Jan Fast. Original b/w photo acquired from German eBay.

situation. In the fall of 2015, areas with closed finds in the form of German Second World War dumpsites started to be found, while I got permission to start my doctoral studies at the University of Helsinki (Fig. 2).

The dumpsites found on the outer perimeter of the camp were gradually excavated as citizen science projects during five excavation seasons organised by Conflict archaeology field schools at Hangö Summer University and as informal learning projects focusing on pedagogic archaeology with local schools. Several hundred people participated in the community archaeology excavation seasons of the camp between 2015–2019 and 2024 (Fig. 3).

The fragile and often very ordinary and mundane personal artefacts, such as animal bones, bottles, and food ration cans found in the dumpsites of the German camp, speak about the lives of the German soldiers and women in the camp during the Second World War. They offer a glimpse into a mostly forgotten side of the war, far away from the frontlines, an industrial war, where ordinary human beings were much like other war materials and were transported from one place to another in the same manner.

The fact that the artefacts survived in the soil after the war can mostly be credited to the fact that the area remained fenced off from visitors after the Second World War, which helped keep at least some areas in the northern perimeter of the former German camp in a natural state. The fact that the area was a nature reserve area also protected artefacts on the ground from illegal metal detecting.



Fig. 3. Archaeologist MA Jan Fast documenting a dumpsite in the "Ukrainerlager" part of the German camp in 2017. Photo: Japo Knuutila.



As already stated earlier, at the beginning of my research, I was in a situation in which all I really had was the map of the former German transition camp. The Hanko Museum and the Finnish National Archives did not have a single artefact or photo that could be related to the German presence in Hanko. The SA-Kuva archives contained some photos showing German troops and troop carriers in Hanko, but the texts and dates on the photos quickly proved to be insufficient, misleading, or wrong.

The many artefacts found in the ground from 2015 onwards were very important for my research but covered only a fairly narrow segment of the materiality of the camp. I felt like I needed more pieces to complete the puzzle.

Because of this, I decided to try my luck on the Internet, and between 2014 and 2024, I made daily internet searches for photographs, letters, or other artefacts that were related to Deutsches Lager Hanko, the town of Hanko between 1942 and 1944, and the furlough journey of German soldiers or troop transports between Finland and Germany during the Second World War.

Gradually, the hard work started to pay off, and bits and pieces of the puzzle, like photographs and letters, started to pop up mostly on German eBay but also on several other Internet sites like the Finnish Huuto.net. Luckily, most of the items so crucial for my research could be acquired for only a couple of euros each. Over the internet, I also got in contact with relatives of German soldiers and Finnish Lottas, as well as militaria collectors, who were willing to donate, share, or borrow artefacts for my research.

In modern conflict archaeology, the items found on the Internet and other sources can be considered material culture just like the artefacts found in the ground and studied in any different ways. In this thesis, the pictures, letters, and other items were treated as finds and mainly used to illustrate the German presence in Hanko and to better understand the furlough journey and life in the camp in general (Fig. 4).

After having completed my thesis, all the photographs and letters related to the camp found a home at the Hanko Front Museum and Hanko Museum.



Fig. 4. Then and now. The south beach of Cape Tulliniemi photographed in 1942 and the exact same spot in 2024. Photo: Jan Fast. Original b/w photo: SA-kuva.

From the start of my research, I set out to communicate the excavation results to the public using both traditional and social media. There were at least three reasons for this:

- First, I needed the publicity to get in contact with people who could help me with my research by donating artefacts or sharing information that they might have about the camp through interviews.
- Second, I needed to advertise the possibility of participating in the community archaeology excavations on site.
- The third reason was that I wanted to share information about the research process itself with the public.

Working with the traditional media proved to be somewhat more difficult than what I had anticipated, despite my years of experience working closely with reporters during excavations. Especially the combination of modern conflict archaeology and photographic art research in the camp was difficult to grasp for many reporters.

During many occasions the otherwise well-written articles also got their share of click bait journalism in the form of for instance the common use of the word Nazi in the headlines regardless of what the article itself was about. I strongly feel that it was totally unnecessary for the media to fabricate this kind of clickbait headline to overly dramatise an

already compelling and tragic story of the camp and its Second World War history.

Thanks to the intense media work, I was soon contacted by elderly people from Hanko and other parts of Finland who had information and stories they would like to share about the camp. In the 1980s, interviews with civilians and Finnish Lottas who worked in the camp had been conducted and published by reporter and amateur historian Tomy Karlsson in Hanko, but these people, most of whom were very young during the 1942–1944 period, had not previously been asked to tell their stories.

Realising that time was quickly running out, I decided to make the last effort to interview these persons about the German presence in Hanko. Although their memories after 80+ years were quite vague and, of course, not scientifically accurate, I decided that I wanted to include them anonymously in my thesis. All the people I interviewed between 2014 and 2022 have since passed.

In 2017, I travelled to Breitenbrunn in southern Germany to interview German war veteran Gebirgsjäger Oberleutnant Siegfried Ehrt about his collections of his time in Finland and visits to Hanko between 1942 and 1944. Ehrt also supplied me with a few unique colour photographs taken inside Deutsches Lager Hanko in 1943 before he passed away in 2021.

In 2017, I also made a trip to Bremen to acquire some items that had belonged to Gebirgsjäger Leutnant Gerd Klöver, who passed through Deutsches Lager Hanko in 1943 before being killed on the Eismeerfront a couple of months later and before the birth of his daughter Gerda. Gerda Smorra contributed to my research and the exhibition in Hanko by borrowing items and giving me access to her father's letters, photographs, and war diary with information about his visit to the camp.

Adding to these interviews, I also found an internet interview of German Gebirgsjäger Wilhelm Hertzele, where he speaks about his visit to the camp in the summer of 1943.

It was not until 2019 that I had all the finds and data I needed to start writing my thesis. At that point, several decades had passed since I started my archaeology studies. During my studies in the 1980s and 1990s, archaeologists in Finland were mostly considered to deal with the period before 1150 AD, and nobody could ever have imagined that

soon an archaeologist would be excavating sites from the Second World War.

As already mentioned, after my studies, I worked as a field archaeologist and was mostly occupied with citizen science, informal learning projects, and writing popular articles about archaeology. Writing a modern conflict archaeology PhD thesis was, of course, much different than what I was accustomed to, and a huge learning process for me from start to finish.

Modern conflict archaeology theory or fieldwork is still not taught at the university level in Finland, but I was happy to get Professor Volker Heyd as my supervisor. He had previously supervised a conflict archaeology doctoral thesis at the University of Bristol. My second supervisor was a war historian, docent Oula Silvennoinen, an expert in Finnish-German relations during the Second World War.

After careful consideration and many discussions with my supervisors, I set out to write a 250-page monograph in English about the archaeology and history of the camp. The English language was chosen because so little about the Finnish-German war effort during the Second World War, and conflict archaeology research in Finland in general, had been published for an international audience. Because of the choice of language and targeted readers outside of Finland, a concise chapter on Finland in the Second World War was included at the beginning of the thesis.

Although the limited number of pages forced me to narrow down parts of the text, it helped me to keep the thesis tight and focused on the archaeology and objective history of the camp, and the German troop transports through Hanko. The many unique photos and photographs of excavation finds and other artefacts found during the many years of research were included in the text to make the thesis more readable. In the style of writing, I also wanted to break out of the traditional format of an archaeological thesis.

In March and late April 2024, I received extremely valuable preliminary examination reports with remarks on my manuscript from Professor Emeritus Nicholas Saunders from the University of Bristol and Associate Professor of contemporary archaeology, Stein Farstadvoll, at the Arctic University of Norway. Their important remarks made it possible to improve the text further, although at that point, the tight timetable of



the publication of the book made it difficult to make any larger adjustments to the text.

The results of modern conflict archaeology research on the history and archaeology of the German Transition camp on Cape Tulliniemi and the German troop transports through Hanko highlight the importance of logistics during the Second World War.

During wartime, even small towns like Hanko could become important places if they could contribute to the German war effort by having a good harbor or good railway connections to facilitate troop movements and war material transports to the north. Between 1942 and 1944, Hanko had both, and the town became an important part of Hitler's war in the far north.

The construction of a large transition camp was necessary to make the transportation of German soldiers travelling on furlough as effective as possible. In Nazi Germany, the home-leave was not only a military issue aimed at letting the soldiers meet their loved ones and families during the strained times of war. It was also an important and regulated political tool that linked the frontlines and the home front. During furlough, the soldiers were supposed not only to recover from their war strains and gain strength, but also to boost the morale of the people at home.

Many engagements and marriages were formed, and children were conceived during the home leaves, either for personal reasons or as part of the population policy of the regime. Soldiers and their next of kin were usually both physically and mentally stronger after home leave, which served the long-term goals of the regime.

On the Finnish front, the much-awaited journey of the German soldiers travelling on home leave started on the frontlines, or wherever in Finland or even northern Norway they were stationed. From there, the soldier first had to make his way by foot, truck, bus, or some other means of transport to larger towns like Rovaniemi or Oulu, which were the main starting points of the long journey home to Germany.

After that it was time for a train journey either through neutral Sweden until the summer of 1943, or through Finland to the large transition camps in Turku or Hanko in the south. The sea journey from Hanko to the Baltic coast and harbors like Reval, Libau, or Stettin was made on Cargo ships that had been converted to troop carriers. The entire journey

home for a little more than a week of home leave and back to the front lines could take up to a month.

Every week, thousands of German soldiers passed through the transition camp at Cape Tulliniemi, and for most of the German soldiers, who were stationed in Finland and travelling on furlough from Finland to Germany between 1942 and 1944, Deutsches Lager Hanko would become a familiar place.

The modern conflict archaeology research of the architecture of Deutsches Lager Hanko illustrates the layout, structure, and inner hierarchy of the camp as well as the individual barracks in which the German soldiers, female auxiliaries, and Ukrainian voluntary helpers were housed while staying at the camp.

The 171 probably Finnish-made simple wooden barracks and other constructions of the camp were built in a hurry and were originally intended to stay in use only for a relatively short period of time. It is important to note that the camp consisted of two large separate areas (Figs. 5 and 6).



Fig. 5. Color photograph taken in the “Urlauberlager” part of the German camp in May 1943. Original b/w photo acquired from German war veteran Siegfried Ehrt.



Fig. 6. One of the crumbling barracks in the "Entlausungsdorf" part of the camp photographed in the winter of 2022. Photo: Aleksi Rikkinen.

The first area was the Entlausungsdorf delousing area in the so-called "Unreine" or dirty/unhealthy side of the camp, consisting of two large delousing facilities and six large barracks for soldiers, three washing barracks, a kitchen, a barracks for the luggage of the soldiers, and four latrines.

The main part camp was built on the flat top of the cape, as far away as possible from the very windy shores and some four meters above sea level. This protected them from the icy cold winds from the direction of the sea during the winter and early spring months.

Architecturally the barracks were quite well suited for their purpose, especially here in the southernmost part of Finland, where there was not much snow during the winter. The low roof angle of the barracks might otherwise have caused problems when heavy snow accumulated on the top of the roof.

But Cape Tulliniemi can still be a very cold place from November to the end of May. Interviews with Finnish soldiers who were housed in the barracks soon after the war complained about one quite serious problem with the barracks, namely that they were very cold to live in and required much firewood for heating.

The number of lavatories in the camp was probably sufficient for the thousands of German soldiers staying there at the same time, but the number of washing facilities can be considered insufficient for the number of soldiers in the camp, especially during winter when washing yourself in the sea was not possible. Fig. 7.

Deutsches Lager Hanko was like a huge transit terminal with trains full of soldiers arriving and departing day and night. Further away, ships' horns signaled the almost daily arrivals and departures of German troop carriers.

During their boring wait for either the train or the ship, the German soldiers spent their time in the camp taking care of their health and hygiene, playing board games, playing music, singing, eating, drinking, smoking and sleeping. The camp formed a meeting place for soldiers from different units, regions, and battlefields, making up a formidable cooking pot for spreading rumors and stories about the war and life back home in Germany.

Many eyewitness accounts speak about how neat, well-kept, and tidy the camp was. This testifies to the efforts of the Germans to run a



Fig. 7. A wall sign that originally stood in the "Armee Verpflegungs Lager" forbade entry by unauthorized persons. Photo: Jan Fast.



well-organized, clean, and healthy camp, but also to the hard discipline inside the camp, where the soldiers were kept busy with cleaning and other activities during their short, temporary stays.

Deutsches Lager Hanko was not a place the German soldiers were longing to visit while they were travelling on home leave. Like modern-day travelers today, their minds were instead set on the people at home or those they left behind, or on the travel destination where they were heading (Figs. 8 and 9).



Fig. 8. German "Gebirgsjäger" arriving in Hanko harbor in February 1942. Original b/w photo acquired from German eBay.



Fig. 9. German Gebirgsjäger in Hanko harbor in May 1942. Original b/w photo acquired from German eBay.



Relations between the German soldiers and the Hanko townspeople were close and overwhelmingly friendly. Some soldiers who were permanently stationed in the camp could visit the town and form relationships with the locals. Their contacts with locals also benefited the soldiers in the camp, most of whom were not allowed to visit the town.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about the results of my research and share thoughts and ideas about what I think could be done regarding modern conflict archaeology research of Second World War sites, community archaeology excavations, and informal learning with schools in the future.

- Hanko harbour and Deutsches Lager Hanko formed an important part of the logistics of Hitler's war in the north. The architecture of the camp and the finds from many different sources offer a new and almost totally overlooked glimpse into the materiality and life in a German transition camp during the Second World War.

- The artefacts found in the dumpsites of the camp and on the internet bring humanity and the individual experience of war to the fore. The finds and individual experiences of the participants at the excavations provoke relevant discussions and thoughts about the role of ordinary humans caught up in a World War.

- The modern conflict archaeology research of sites like the German transition camp in Hanko increases the knowledge and interest in the Second World War history among the public, especially among school students.

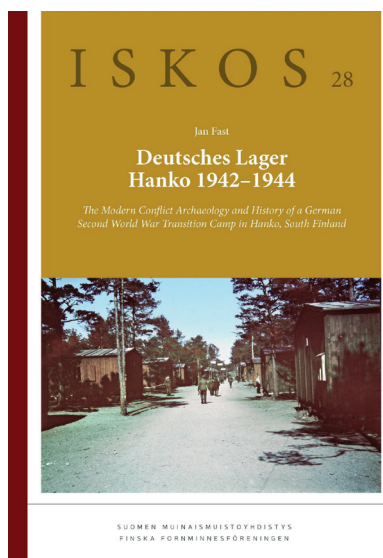
Informal learning during modern conflict archaeology excavations can and should be integrated into the educational plans of schools in the larger Hanko region and other areas of Finland in the future.

After these years of researching the German transition camp in Hanko, I am fully convinced that Second World War camp sites should be considered cultural heritage sites despite their relatively young age.

Sites like Deutsches Lager Hanko provide important scientific, educational, and tourism potential for future generations. They are also places of remembrance and part of the historical cultural landscape, much in the same way as prehistoric dwelling sites and medieval villages and structures from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In Finland conflict archaeology is still a very new field of study and is practiced by only a handful of archaeologists. The situation is, however,

changing rapidly as conflict archaeology is becoming increasingly popular among archaeology students. The opportunity to study multidisciplinary conflict archaeology and the archaeology of the contemporary past at the University of Helsinki in the near future would be more than welcome.



Jan Fast: *Deutsches Lager Hanko 1942–1944. The Modern Conflict Archaeology and History of a German Second World War Transition Camp in Hanko, South Finland*. Iskos 28. Helsinki: Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistys.

Väitöskirjan sähköinen versio on ladattavissa Helsingin yliopiston julkaisuarkistosta: <https://helda.helsinki.fi/items/8cec089e-39a3-4cde-82aa-45dc4d438bc2>

**FT Jan Fast** väitteli Helsingin yliopiston humanistisessa tiedekunnassa lauantaina 12.10.2024 väitöskirjallaan *Deutsches Lager Hanko 1942-1944. The Modern Conflict Archaeology and History of a German Second World War Transition Camp in Hanko, South Finland*. Vastaväittäjänä toimi professori emeritus Nicholas Saunders, University of Bristol, ja kustoksena professori Kristiina Mannermaa, Helsingin yliopisto.