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Digging the material remains of Hitler's arctic war

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“Dark Heritage” – “Synkkä kulttuuriperintö”

That is a term appearing regularly throughout my doctoral dissertation (Seitsonen 2018), which is part of a wider “Lapland's Dark Heritage” project that studies the German Second World War material legacy in northern Finland, funded by the Academy of Finland. Use of the term “Dark Heritage” has attracted some questions from the public over the last four years, for example, what does dark mean in heritage anyway and why?

The concept of “Dark Heritage” has been gaining ground in archaeological and cultural heritage discussions over the recent years. This has happened in tandem with the wider recognition that heritage values are not universal, and instead of any single canonized official perspective, heritage should be approached more democratically and multivocally, in the spirit of the “postcolonial politics of representation and difference”, as Rodney Harrison (2013: 580) has put it. This is especially appropriate in Finnish Lapland, which is part of Sápmi, the homeland of Sámi people stretching across the northern shore of Europe. Sápmi has been subject to colonial policies for centuries, although this has been largely ignored in the Nordic national narratives, and any postcolonial perspectives on things have only recently started to emerge.

As a term “Dark Heritage” derives from the theoretical background of a better defin-

ed field of “Dark Tourism”. It has been used in the tourism research since 1990s, to refer to the recreational uses of places related to death, conflicts, and suffering. Dark tourism, sometimes also referred to as Thanatourism, designating the Ancient Greek personification of death Thanatos, places a lot of emphasis on the attraction to death as a key theme in its discussions. However, “Dark Heritage” is better understood as a broader attempt to widen the field of cultural heritage from a differing standpoint. It is best seen as an umbrella term, which is not narrowly focused with death or atrocities, but instead covers a wide range of topics which reach beyond the traditionally recognized heritage frameworks.

“Dark Heritage” can include such obvious examples as the Second World War concentration and death camps, some of which are recognized as World Heritage Sites, but also a host of other, more elusive localities, such as execution places, bombing sites, and even haunted places. It can also refer more generally to ignored, unwanted, or difficult forms of heritage, for instance, to famous disaster sites such as Chernobyl, pollution of the environment, industrial ruins and the suffering of industrial workers, and other failures of Supermodernity.

Also, “Dark Heritage”, owing to its fluid definition, is not necessarily perceived as equally dark by everybody, depending, for instance, on their personal background and involvement, the hierarchies in society, and the amount of time that has passed. The perceived darkness

of heritage can also change through time, as also the other heritage values and understandings. Tourism researchers, for example Philip Stone, have been paying attention since the late 1990s on the various shades of darkness related to Dark Tourism sites, depending for instance on their commercialization, authenticity and associated tourism infrastructure. Recently also the “Dark Heritage” researchers have started recognizing the multi-vocality of interpretations and varying shades of dark related to the material legacies. I have presented in my dissertation one baseline sketch for assessing the shades of darkness of Lapland’s Second World War heritage. As an example, even such sites as prisons or military camps are not necessarily seen as equally dark by everyone, depending on their personal background and inside knowledge.

Talking of background and inside knowledge, it must be remembered, that the experience of the Second World War in the North was something completely different from the southern parts of the country. After the heavy losses of the Winter War, Finland deemed that a new war with the Soviet Union was just a matter of time, and joined forces with Nazi

Germany (Fig. 1). German troops started arriving in Lapland in 1940, and from 1941 to 1944 the long frontline from the Lake Oulujärvi to the Arctic Ocean was mostly held by the Germans. At the height of their military built-up there were more Nazi German troops and their multinational prisoners and forced labourers than local inhabitants in Lapland. Although Lapland had been for centuries a hub for long-distance contact networks from all cardinal directions, this sudden and unexpected appearance of foreigners in their thousands brought an unprecedented air of direct internationalism to the North. This left its deeply ingrained mark on the local communal memories, and also concretely on the local landscapes. Illustratively, the period is often remembered in the north as the “German time”.

Germans established thousands of military installations all around northern Finland, ranging from isolated guard posts in the wilderness to major garrison areas in the northern towns, such as Rovaniemi, Tornio and Oulu. There was relatively little actual fighting on the northern front, as even the most battle-hardened German soldiers were unprepared for the northern conditions, and their advance



Figure 1. Original caption: “In the wilderness of Lapland also Germans use reindeer transport, which is offered by a Finnish unit” (Photograph: SA-kuva 82140/ Sot.virk. H.Roivainen/Petsamo, Suonikylä-Lutto, Lounakoski/ 13 April 1942).

bogged down soon after it was launched in the summer 1941. The feelings of being lost and dislocated in an alien northern environment appear to have taken many curious material and behavioural forms that are visible in the archaeologically documented material. This is illustrated, for instance, by the attempts to separate the "cultured" camp areas from the surrounding wilderness, perceived as threatening by the Germans, with symbolic means, such as lining the pathways with small rocks or building façade-like fences.

Owing to Lapland's simple infrastructure, large numbers of the German troops became entangled in building projects and other assignments behind the frontlines. These allowed also profitable work and business opportunities for the locals, and for the Finnish companies, such as woodcraft companies supplying the German army with tents and barracks. Also the outwardly neutral Sweden was actively involved in this war business, and this era is still remembered in northern Sweden as the time of "Petsamo traffic", referring to the Swedish logistical companies' large-scale trucking of German material to the northern front. These business activities were not without their ethical implications. As an example, the prisoners-of-war were often rented out as workforce for companies, and this business activity did, at least indirectly, enable the Nazi war efforts and the connected violence. Unsurprisingly, the wartime is typically absent from the involved companies' historical reviews.

However, there were not enough workers in the thinly inhabited northern periphery of Finland to answer the German call for workforce, which explains the presence of a large number of multinational prisoners and forced labourers. According to historians Lars Westerlund (2008) and Reinhard Otto (2008), the Germans took about 9000 prisoners on the northern front, and imported some 20 000 more from all over the Axis-controlled Europe, for example from Poland, Serbia, Ukraine, Ingria and Norway, to work in their projects. Germans and their prisoners lived and worked for several years as neighbours of the locals in many parts of Lapland, and during this time close personal relationships were formed.

These are often recounted in the familial and communal memories of the "German time". It is also important to note, that for the locals "their Germans" represented mentally something detached from the "Nazis" in the South, and nobody refers to the Germans in Lapland as Nazis in the discussions.

On a national-level the friendly relations came to an end when Finland signed a cease-fire treaty in 1944 after a major Soviet offensive in the south. This cease-fire treaty demanded Finns to drive out their German allies on an unrealistic schedule, and a Soviet invasion of Lapland was feared. Finns and Germans evacuated first together most of Lapland's civilians from the anticipated northern war zone, although for example many reindeer herders preferred to stay behind on the fields with their animals. Lapland's refugees were transported to western Finland and Sweden, which agreed to take them on a very short notice.

Through September 1944, both Finns and Germans played mock war, but this soon turned hot under increasing Soviet pressure. As a result, not only the German military installations, but also massive parts of the northern infrastructure and private property were destroyed by the German troops retreating to the occupied Norway. As a result of this, upon their return to the North most of Lapland's refugees found their homes and property in ashes, and had to start rebuilding their lives from the scratch. As an example, in the village of Inari only one fence post was left standing after the German retreat.

There are hundreds of decaying German military sites in Lapland, especially in the more remote areas, but also in and around towns, as for example Historian Kalevi Mikkonen's (2016) recent studies in Rovaniemi have illustratively shown. The sheer number of German military installations in northern Finland is astonishing and only a fraction of them have so far been documented. This is perhaps best illustrated by the increase in the number of prisoner-of-war and work camps identified by the cultural heritage authorities and historians. In little over a decade their number has grown from a handful known in the early 2000s to the over 180 camps listed in my dissertation

(Fig. 2). This is in large part thanks to the recent, substantial survey project of government-controlled forests by the National Board of Forestry. However, it must be remembered that the locals have always been familiar with the sites in their own landscapes.

Over the decades these sites were mostly ignored and any question of their heritage status was raised only recently. The vast German material remains have been often dubbed, especially by the national media, dismissively as “war junk” spoiling the “pristine” natural beauty of the Lapland wilderness. This view

resulted also in a “war junk” cleaning project by a Rovaniemi-based environmental organisation in 2004–2010, during which over one hundred tons of material were collected from the landscape and sold as scrap metal (Herva 2014; Seitsonen 2018).

The traces of the Second World War Nazi German presence in northern Finland, first as slightly awkward brothers-in-arms providing much needed help in the fight against the Soviet Union, and then as enemies in the Lapland War, are rather concrete examples of “Dark Heritage”. The darkness of German material re-



Figure 2. Map of the German-run prisoner-of-war and forced labour camps in northern Finland (Map: Oula Seitsonen 2016).

mains must be understood against the outlined wider theoretical framework of “Dark Heritage”, instead of seeing it through any narrow, stereotypic lense of “evil Nazis burning down Lapland”, as is often mythicized in the popular culture, and also recapped in the Finnish national master narrative of the war in Lapland. These traces of war represent sites, landscapes and materialities associated, if not directly then at least indirectly, with the worldwide carnage, atrocities, death and suffering, and have been deemed as something confusing and unwanted polluting the landscape, at least by outsiders.

Presenting the former German brothers-in-arms as “Lapland and church burners” made of course sense in the aftermath of the war, by staging Finland essentially as a victim of Nazi aggression for the western Allies in the new political situation. However, it is indeed the emphasis that the national master narrative places on the “burning of Lapland”, that has side-lined and diminished the northern Finnish and Sámi war experiences for decades. Also, this powerful imagery of destruction by fire and explosion, which is at the heart of Lapland War narrative on a national level, has effectively overrun many other, more silent regional and local narratives. These, on the other hand, are exactly the kind of indigenous, multi-vocal perspectives that we have been interested in collecting in our fieldwork. Besides archaeological studies, we have interviewed over thirty stakeholders from different backgrounds, mostly in northern Lapland in Inari, Sodankylä and Enontekiö. These local perceptions of the wartime material legacy illustrate truly subaltern, unspoken and silenced voices from the north. These are largely coloured by the local communal, familial and personal histories, which are closely intertwined with the places and the wartime material remains, and illustrate the peoples’ intimate ties to their own lands and their own long-term cultural landscapes.

For the locals, the German remains, and all the other traces of the past, are an ever-present part of their lifeworlds, “the taken-for-granted fabric and dynamic of everyday life that largely happens automatically without conscious attention or deliberate plan” as Geographical Theorist David Seamon (2006: 55) has descri-

bed. The local experience of wartime heritage underlines its social value as a vital part of the long-term lived-in cultural landscapes (Fig. 3). The local folklore, resilient sense-of-place, and environmental perception all secure people into their own lands through the corporeal landscape biographies, which tie together the past, present and future. The traces of German presence have become deeply embedded into this longer cultural continuum and act as active agent of memory.

Many locals also feel that the southern authorities lack interest in this northern heritage, and other northern issues, and would like to safeguard their *own legacy* from outside tempering, such as the mentioned “war junk project”. For the locals this appeared as a nonchalant wiping out of their communal and family histories, and was perceived as an unwanted southern intrusion into their lands. Thus, the traces of German presence and war have become to stand out also as symbols of north-south confrontations, the marginalization of north, and Lapland’s long, yet little discussed colonial history. These mirror also the Finnish State’s sluggishness in answering, or even recognizing, the complex colonial issues, and the consequent questions of land-use rights and ownership.

Then again, for outsiders the German “junk” easily represents other kinds of undertones, typically tinted by the “Lapland burners” perception. Looking from outside, the rusty ruins in the wilderness might appear as unwanted, threatening and confusing traces of a faceless Nazi war-machine. This easily promotes an attitude that these should be cleaned from threatening the animals and people in the “pristine” nature. However, this cleaning perspective is based on approaching the material traces and the northern landscapes with a biased “western gaze”, by drawing a strict line between “nature” and “culture”. This kind of attempt to leave nature unmarked by human activity has been described by anthropologist Tim Ingold (2004: 329) as a “leitmotif through the recent history of western societies”. This ultimately labels the locals’ long-term lived-in cultural landscape as an empty natural wilderness, which reflects popular culture images representing the Sámi as “people of nature” (Ri-



Figure 3. Material legacy of the German Second World War presence in the local cultural landscape in Utsjoki: Remains of the Junkers Ju 52/3m transport airplane 7U+OM that crashed at the Lake Ylä-Pulmankijärvi in 1944 (Photograph: Oula Seitsonen 2017).

danpää 2016: 20). Then again, in the northern environmental awareness it is not meaningful to strictly separate “nature” and “culture”, and instead, the local cultural landscape should be approached relationally as a cognitively controlled, overlapping, fluid and embodied unity.

Maintenance and endurance of a place and its materialities may in fact be seen as analogous to cherishing personal memories. This perspective emphasises the role of ancestral lands, and the transmitting of oral traditions and meanings attached to the landscape. Maintaining and promoting heritage is based on forms of remembering, yet memory studies suggest that the process of forgetting is essential to remembering. Especially in a Second World War setting associated with suffering, death, and in Lapland, with the Nazis, there is always a risk of “aestheticizing” the past by selectively forgetting unpleasant and negative experiences. It must also be remembered that the

studied communities themselves are complex and multifaceted entities, and some public perceptions of and engagements with the wartime legacy might differ starkly from the views held by academics. Still, it is important to recognize, and even to celebrate, the multi-vocality and heterogeneity of the heritage perceptions, in a democratic manner.

Archaeologist and geographer Oula Seitsonen defended his Ph.D. thesis “*Digging Hitler's Arctic War: Archaeologies and Heritage of the Second World War German Military Presence in Finnish Lapland*” on March 2, 2018 at the University of Helsinki. Paul Mullins, Professor of Anthropology, IUPUI, USA, acted as the opponent, and Suzie Thomas, Professor of Cultural Heritage, University of Helsinki, as the custos.

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