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2017

bÿ Seitsonen , O & Herva , V-P 2017 , 'War junk' and cultural heritage : Second World War German material culture in Finnish Lapland', Paper presented at The 45th Annual Chacmool Archaeology Conference , Calgary , Canada , 08/11/2012 - 11/11/2012 pp. 170-185 .

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"War Junk" and Cultural Heritage: Viewpoints on World War II German Material Culture in the Finnish Lapland

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This paper maps diverse attitudes towards the heritage of the World War II German military presence in Finnish Lapland of northernmost Europe. As part of Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union, German troops had the frontal responsibility in northern Finland in 1941–1944. After a cease-fire between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1944, increasing Soviet pressure forced Finland to turn against the Germans, resulting in the "Lapland War" between the former allies. During their retreat to Norway, German troops destroyed their military bases and Lapland's towns, infrastructure, and private property. The Germans, from a Finnish perspective, were both friends and foes who provided important support in the war against the Soviet Union, but who also "burned down Lapland." Not surprisingly, World War II Finnish-German relations have been a sensitive subject in Finland. Remains of German military sites are abundant in Lapland, but lack official heritage status and have been often regarded in public in negative terms. Archaeological research, among other forms of engaging with the difficult heritage of the German presence, could put this material heritage into positive uses while helping to reconcile with this troubled episode in recent Finnish past.

This paper will briefly map diverse attitudes towards the heritage of the World War II German military presence in Finnish Lapland, in northernmost Europe (Figure 1). World War II has played an important role in the post-war construction of Finnish national identity, albeit the appropriation, representation, and remembrance of aspects of the war have been

selective (e.g., Kivimäki 2012). The "heroic" Finnish battle against the Soviet Union during the "Winter War" of 1939–1940 has been widely glorified and commemorated in Finland as recognized part of the "National narrative", whereas the wartime Finnish-German relations represent a more awkward and difficult aspect of the Finnish experience and memory of World

Seitsonen, Oula, and Vesa-Pekka Herva. 2017. "War Junk" and Cultural Heritage: Viewpoints on World War II German Material Culture in the Finnish Lapland. In *War & Peace: Conflict and Resolution in Archaeology. Proceedings of the 45th Annual Chacmool Archaeology Conference*, edited by Adam K. Benfer. pp. 170–185. Chacmool Archaeology Association, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, CA.

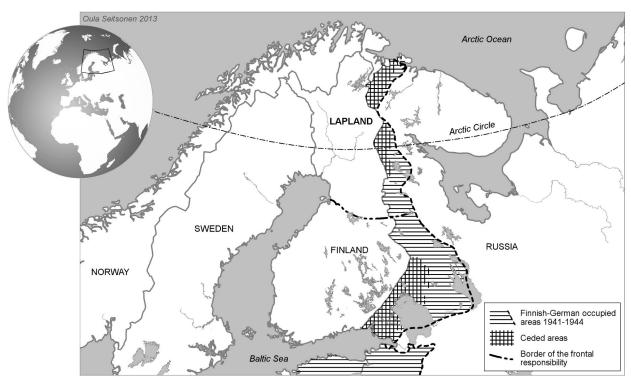


Figure 1: Location of Finnish Lapland, showing the areas occupied by the Finnish-German troops from 1941 to 1944, the border between the Finnish and German frontal responsibility, and the areas ceded to the Soviet Union after the war (Illustration: Oula Seitsonen).

War II.

Although there was no formal alliance between the two countries, Finland had close ties with Germany in the later part of World War II. After the Winter War, Finland resorted to German material and other support in a situation where a new war against the Soviet Union was only a matter of time, and consequently cooperated with the Germans on their 1941 attack on the Soviet Union. Towards the end of World War II, however, Soviet Union forced the Finns to turn against their former German brothers-in-arms, which resulted in the so-called "Lapland War" between the former allies.

These complicated Finnish-German relationships have produced a controversial Finnish perception of the German military presence in Finland. On the one hand, there is the

notion of "good Germans" who provided Finland with much-needed help during the war. Yet, on the other hand, there is the embarrassment that the Finns sided with Nazi Germany, whose troops also ended up devastating northernmost Finland, imprinting the Finnish collective memory with an image of the Germans "burning down Lapland."

Few traces are left of the German presence in northern towns today (Ylimaunu et al. 2013) and, in general, little has preserved above the ground of the German sites in the wilderness region of northern Finland. German activities, especially in the wilderness, are poorly known and little documentary evidence is available about them (Westerlund 2008), which renders archaeological and ethnographic research a potentially fruitful approach to the study of German military presence in northern Finland.



Figure 2: Winter day in a German military camp somewhere in Finnish Lapland wilderness during the World War II (Photograph: Max Peronius 1941–1944).

The archaeological potential of German sites, however, is but one aspect of a somewhat larger and rather controversial issue of the value of the "difficult heritage" (e.g., Logan and Reever 2009) associated with the German military presence in northern Finland. Although few German constructions in the wilderness are preserved well enough to catch attention of casual observers, dumps of burned and broken material, including unexploded ordnance (UXO), can be found in considerable quantities at former military campsites and along the German retreat routes. The value of this "war junk" has recently become a particularly salient matter of debate and disagreement between and among the heritage professionals and the public (see Heinäaho and Rautiainen 2011).

In what follows, we will map and discuss the tangible and intangible imprints of the German troops and their activities on the Finnish landscapes and mindscapes. We will also outline some key issues and controversies regarding the value of, and attitudes to the (material) remains associated with the German military presence especially in the wilderness region of Lapland where, for example, about a hundred poorly known German-run Prisoner-of-War (PoW) camps were located. The discussion of these issues nests ultimately in much broader questions regarding the value of "difficult heritage" and the relationships between materiality, memory, representation, preservation, and destruction.

Historical Background and the Context of Research

Finland suffered heavy economic and territorial losses in the brief Winter War of 1939-1940 (Figure 1). In anticipation of a new conflict with the Soviet Union, Finland joined forces with Germany and became involved in Hitler's plans for Operation Barbarossa, an attack on the Soviet Union, which the German troops started in the summer of 1941. The Finns joined the German campaign, albeit formally as a response to a Soviet attack on Finland (Jokipii 1987:612-620). Although Finland and Germany did closely cooperate, there was no formal alliance between the two countries, and Finland was anxious to represent its own war efforts as separate from Hitler's war on the Soviet Union (see further e.g., Jokisipilä 2007; Mann and Jörgensen 2002:93).

German troops were primarily responsible for a northern front extending from central Finland to the Arctic Ocean, and there were at most over 200,000 Germans soldiers stationed in Finland (Jokisipilä 2005:19). The northern front, however, became stationary soon after the launch of Operation Barbarossa (Figure 1), owing to the unpreparedness of the Germans for war in the arctic. A large proportion of their troops were based far behind the front lines, near the northern towns of Oulu, Tornio, and Rovaniemi (Koskela and Pietiläinen 2004; Ylimaunu et al. 2013), and engaged developing the primitive infrastructure of the northern wilderness (Figure 2; Uola 2012; Westerlund 2008:50–56, 292–302). Soviet PoWs provided the main workforce for these construction projects: in addition to about 9,000 Soviet PoWs taken on the northern front, some 20,000 were imported from occupied countries to Finland to serve as a workforce (Westerlund 2008:62-64).

The military situation in Finland changed in the summer of 1944 when the Soviet Union launched a major assault on Finland and forced the country into a cease-fire treaty. This treaty demanded the Finns to drive out the German troops from the country. At first, the Finns and Germans merely pretended to be at war, but the Soviet pressure on the Finns ultimately turned this into a real conflict (Alftan 2005:175). Disillusioned with their former Finnish allies, the German troops resorted to scorched earth tactics upon their retreat from northern Finland to occupied Norway. The casualties of this Lapland War between Finland and Germany were limited, but the material losses were considerable, as the German troops burned down and exploded not only their own military bases and camps but also practically everything along their retreat routes (see Ahto 1980; Kallioniemi 1990).

There has been a tendency in Finland to distance the Finnish war efforts in 1941-1944 from the German, but this "official" view of Finnish-German relations has recently become increasingly critiqued and questioned by both researchers and public (see Kivimäki 2012). Some recent research rightly explores the social—among the military and political—aspects of the German military presence in northern Finland. The Germans and their PoWs brought an unprecedented internationalism thinly populated northern Finland, which was deeply imprinted in the collective memory of the locals (Junila 2000; Lähteenmäki 1999; Virolainen 1999; Wendisch 2006).

Many aspects of the German military presence in Finland, however, are still neglected and/or poorly understood, including the Germanrun — or, to that matter, the Finnish-run — prisoner-of-war and work camps located in the northern wilderness (but see Westerlund 2008). The virtual lack of research on such issues has at least partly to do with the perceived lack of (documentary) evidence—the Germans did, after



Figure 3: Alpine-style German SS officers' club in Alppila, Oulu (Photograph: Timo Ylimaunu).

all, destroy not only their camps but also the related archives before retreating from Finland (Westernlund 2008:22–23). For furthermore, Finnish-German relations were, and in some ways still are, considered in Finnish public discussions a sensitive and difficult subject, which has discouraged critical research (see Jokisipilä 2005:34–35, 2007; Kivimäki 2012). One consequence of this situation is that the material heritage of the German military presence in northern Finland remains largely unrecorded and unvalued although it does actually represent a complex wartime experience in the northernmost periphery of Europe.

The Material Heritage and Archaeology of the German Military Presence in Northern Finland

Although the German sites and material heritage in northern Finland have been long neglected by the archaeologists and other researchers, an interest in those sites is currently building up, boosted by more general developments whereby the materiality and heritage of the twentieth century conflicts has emerged as an important field of study (e.g., Schofield et al. 2002; Gegner and Ziino 2012). Small-scale archaeological research has been recently conducted at a handful of World War II sites in Finland by researchers from the Universities of Helsinki and Oulu

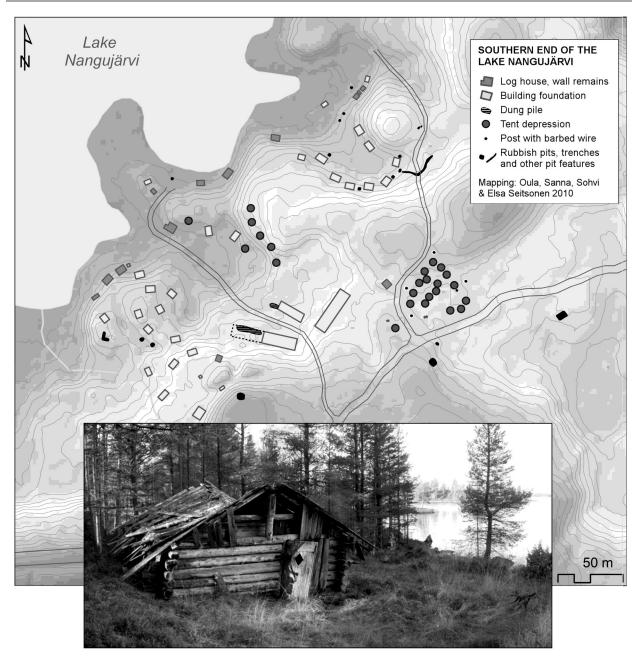


Figure 4: Plan of the "Southern End of the Lake Nangujärvi" site; inset, the best-preserved German-built log house at the site (Illustration and photograph: Oula Seitsonen).

(Koskela and Pietiläinen 2004; Seitsonen and Herva 2011). In addition, the Finnish Forestry Agency (Metsähallitus) now routinely records World War II remains encountered in their surveys of cultural landscapes in their northern forest regions since 2010. Likewise, some local groups in northern Finland have voiced the need to preserve the wartime heritage, but there is little consensus on the scientific, social, or other values of that heritage among both the public and

heritage professionals (see below). This means that critical and theoretically informed engagements with the material remains of the German military presence will be necessary, along with an assessment of the archaeological value of those remains.

The German troops in Finland constructed all kinds of military installations in both urban settings and in the wilderness, ranging from substantial barracks quarters and supply depots to concrete-built defensive lines to short-lived camps and temporary turf huts. Documentary evidence of these works is limited especially in the wilderness region, and researchers have not yet surveyed the material remains in these vast areas in any systematic manner. However, some sites have been documented in varying detail (e.g., Huttunen 1989; Postila 2002; Seitsonen and Herva 2011; Westerlund 2008).

Given that the Germans burned down virtually all their military sites and archives upon their retreat from Finland, much of the material evidence of German sites survives only on or below the ground surface. German-built buildings have disappeared almost completely from the northern Finnish townscapes, but names like "Little Berlin" are still in use, referring to the former German garrison areas (Ylimaunu et al. 2013). An Alpine-style SS officers' club in the city of Oulu is possibly the only substantial German building still standing (Figure 3). However, the surrounding residential area reflects the organization of the German World War II garrison. Archaeologists and historians have recently tentatively studied the transformation of this garrison area into the present-day residential neighborhood from the perspective of how built environments maintain the memory of the past (Ylimaunu et al. 2013).

Sites located in the wilderness are abundant in places, but often relatively invisible. The few

exceptions are bases, which the Germans abandoned before their hasty retreat in 1944, some of which are remarkably well preserved. The "Southern end of the Lake Nangujärvi" site, a PoW and woodcutting camp in Inari, is an illustrative example of this (Figure 4): felling timber for transportation to the northernmost front in the treeless Petsamo tundra was one of the central employments for the slave labor (Uola 2012:292–302; Westerlund 2008:48).

One of the best-preserved sites is the remote "Nangujärvi Saiholompolo" woodcutting and PoW camp that is accessible today only by an off -road vehicle or a boat. Many buildings at the site have preserved well, and one guardhouse even had its roof intact until the winter of 2011 when heavy snowfall finally caved it in. Inside this building, the benches, tables, and bunk beds are still in their original places (Figure 5). Local history enthusiasts have now covered the building with a tarp in an attempt to prevent further damage. In addition, several other structures have their log walls standing at varying heights, such as the kitchen and sauna buildings and several PoW log houses. Decaying remains of narrow bunk beds and other furniture are also preserved in some of the PoW dwellings.

The sites at Lake Nangujärvi clearly have an outstanding potential for studying relationships between German soldiers and PoWs through, for instance, a spatial analysis and the study of archaeological assemblages Seitsonen and Herva 2011). As to the spatiality of German camps, preliminary surveys, and the available wartime photographic material shows considerable variation between the spatial organization and the built environment of different camps. Some sites—such as "Vuotso Kolonnenhof," which we have surveyed (Figure 6)—were organized on a more grid-like plan by the Germans, whereas others were much more



Figure 5. "Nangujärvi Saiholompolo": top, a well preserved guard house before its roof collapsed in the winter 2011 (Photograph: Jari Leskinen / the Lapland Society for Military History); bottom, interior view of the guard house, showing the remains of bunk beds on the left, collapsed table in the middle, and benches along the walls (Photograph: Oula Seitsonen).

"organically" adapted to the local environment (Figure 4; also Seitsonen and Herva 2011).

Small-scale excavations conducted at the Peltojoki base in 2009 (Seitsonen and Herva 2011) and recently at other German sites confirm the high potential of an archaeological approach to the study of German sites, including PoW camps. in the wilderness. In fact. archaeological finds, such as self-made shoes, have proven to be one of the best indicators of PoW presence in many localities. Although the data available is limited at the moment and allows only tentative observations, there are good reasons to believe that the material preserved at various sites enables addressing not only specific details related to the daily life in military camps but a variety of larger issues as well. These issues range from the power relations and discipline embedded in built environments and material culture, to the consumption and waste disposal practices, and to how the German soldiers and their prisoners adapted, materially and mentally, to the northern environments which were alien to them (see Seitsonen and Herva 2011).

Post-War Attitudes to the German Material Heritage

Heritage professionals have recently recognized the need to protect certain World War II sites in Finland: the "heroic" Winter War battlefield of Raatteentie, for instance, has attracted the attention of authorities (Niukkanen 2009), as well as the public. While the commemoration of the Winter War has served to consolidate the Finnish national identity (e.g., Hentilä 1999), the material remains of the German military presence may be seen in more doubtful terms and as something that attracts negative associations both in Lapland, more generally in Finland, and also internationally. Yet forgetting those remains is problematic because it means marginalizing the

multiplicity and contextuality of northern war experiences (see Mytum and Carr 2012)—that is, forgetting the experiences and memories of, for example, the indigenous Sámi of Lapland, the multi-national prisoners and forced/slave laborers, or the ordinary German infantrymen.

At the moment, no systematic research or survey has been conducted on the different perceptions of and attitudes to the material remains of the German military presence in northern Finland. Thus, we base the following discussion largely on our own initial experiences and observations, and on an informal review of opinions expressed in various newspapers and Internet discussion forums.

It seems that many people in Finland, especially outside Lapland, regard the material heritage of the German wartime presence merely as "war junk", a nuisance that is best cleaned up from spoiling the "pristine" Lapland wilderness (Heinäaho and Rautiainen 2011). The cleaning-up of "war junk" became even semi-formalized as a Rovaniemi-based environmental association reported collecting over 100 tons of military materiel in 2005-2010 as a part of a broader agenda to keep Lapland tidy (Pidä Lappi siistinä 2011). This well-meaning (albeit in many ways misinformed) strive for "tidiness" poses a serious threat to the preservation of German and other military sites in Lapland.

Lapland lives largely from tourism (e.g., Saarinen 2001) and, for instance, the local entrepreneurs have undoubtedly believed that the idea of clean wilderness serves tourism, but one wonders if World War II heritage could have positive uses also for the tourism industry. The apparently widespread ignorance and neglect of, if not hostility to, the wartime military sites leaves them also open to exploitation by collectors of war memorabilia (although technically all the material is owned by the

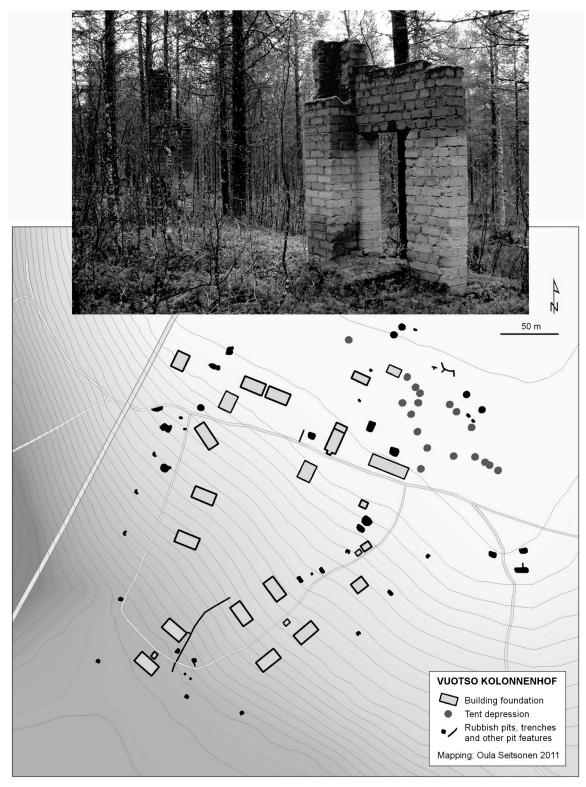


Figure 6: Plan of the "Vuotso Kolonnenhof" site; inset, remains of German barracks at the site (Illustration and photograph: Oula Seitsonen).

Finnish Defense Forces). While there are rumors of looting, it is difficult to assess the extent of such activity: nonetheless, signs of metal detecting unauthorized digging encountered at numerous sites, and even a quick sweep through Internet military discussion groups indicates that collectors and metal detectorists know Lapland as a potential source of memorabilia even beyond the Finnish borders. For instance, recently some of our informants witnessed when an international group of memorabilia hunters transported remains of an almost complete German wartime Opel Blitz truck across the Finnish border to Norway.

The casual conceptualization of the wartime material as mere rubbish is problematic from a heritage point of view and effectively negates its historical and social value. In response to the "cleaning" of World War II sites, a group of local aficionados has recently established the Lapland Society for Military History (Lapin sotahistoriallinen seura) to promote the protection and commemoration of at least some German sites (Lapin sotahistoriallinen seura 2011). They have, for example, rented the lands of the Nangujärvi PoW camps in a hope to protect them that way, and are interested in restoring the remaining structures and harnessing the sites for the purposes of tourism. The society has also been active in monitoring the condition of numerous sites and has provided invaluable assistance for the archaeological fieldwork.

In our experience, local people have a positive attitude towards the archaeological study of German sites and have generously shared information and memories associated with the studied localities. This, of course, makes good sense, since for the local people the German sites often link directly to their own wartime experiences, or to the experiences of their parents or grandparents, which they feel have often been

neglected in the official histories. Yet this does not necessarily mean that all the locals were actually interested in, or felt it necessary to preserve the sites — people can merely recognize these sites as a more or less (at least outwardly) indifferent part of their everyday environment. For the people practicing reindeer herding, for instance, the decaying material remains of the war appear to represent simply another layer of their intimately known herding landscape, and earlier a potential source of timber and other fencing material. Finally, as may be expected, there are also people who are explicit in their opinion that all tangible and intangible remains of the German military presence in Lapland are best ignored, as they represent a chapter of history which needs to be put behind and forgotten (see below).

An important aspect of World War II heritage in northern Finland is that Lapland is the homeland of the indigenous Sámi. The local Sámi media have expressed a particular interest in our fieldwork and many elders have willingly shared their childhood experiences of the war. Thus far the Sámi experience of World War II has attracted relatively little attention in Finland (but see Aikio 2000; Lehtola 1994); it has often been forgotten in the public discussions that the German military presence in Finland affected both the Finns and the Sámi (as well as their land).

Images and Memories of Destruction

World War II was characterized world widely by a massive-scale destruction of things and people, as epitomized by the "death factories" of German concentration camps (e.g., Gilead et al. 2009; Myers 2008, 2011). The Lapland War resulted in a relatively small number of casualties, but the infrastructure of northern Finland suffered heavily. For example, Rovaniemi, the "capital" of



Figure 7: Original caption: Destroyed city. Rovaniemi ("Tuhoutunutta kaupunkia. Rovaniemi.", translation by the authors; Photograph: unknown/SA-kuva 167057/October 1944).

Lapland, was virtually annihilated by fire, and the photographs of its ruins represent the most iconic images of the Lapland War (Figure 7). In addition to the destroyed infrastructure, Germans killed tens of thousands of head of cattle and reindeer, which had a profound effect on the herder economy (Ursin 1980; Lehtola 1994). Furthermore, the German troops planted all over the landscape explosives during their retreat, which killed hundreds of people and animals after the war (Kallioniemi 1990:55–61, 266, 269).

UXO presents a potential hazard even today in Lapland and is found every year, for instance, by metal detectorists. Even though this hazard should not be ignored — especially when it comes to closer engagements with wartime sites,

such as archaeological excavation — the recurring tendency in various contexts to emphasize the danger posed by UXO (see below) is interesting in its own right, given that the last documented accident with German ordnance happened decades ago.²

For example, the association that organized campaigns of collecting and recycling of "war junk" in the name of keeping Lapland tidy tapped the rhetorical power afforded by UXO. The emphasis of the danger posed by UXO would imply that the material remains of the German military presence are, first and foremost, perceived as threatening rather than valuable. We do not know whether this aspect of danger was deliberately stressed by the association to justify

the collection of the metal. Alternatively, such rhetoric might reflect the wider predominance of the images and narratives of destruction associated with the Lapland War.

The relationships between German troops and Finnish civilians were generally amicable in 1941–1944, resulting, for instance, in romantic affairs between the locals and Germans (e.g., Wendisch 2006). Based on our initial interviews, those who lived during the war remembered this side of the German presence in northern Finland well (also, Jokisipilä 2005; Junila 2000; Lähteenmäki 1999; Virolainen 1999). However, given that these same people saw their homeland demolished by fire and explosives at the end of the war, it is, of course, perfectly understandable that the latter powerful images of destruction feature often prominently in the (northern) Finnish collective memory (see Gonzales-Ruibal 2008).

The informants have frequently brought up the themes of destruction during our fieldwork at German sites. At the Peltojoki camp, for example, a local elderly Sámi man was quick to warn us about the explosives that he had discovered at the site and shared his memories of how, as a child, he had played with and exploded hand grenades and landmines there. While mapping the "Vuotso Kolonnenhof' site, in turn, a person associated with the abovementioned environmental association repetitively warned us of landmines and underlined how dangerous the site was. This time, however, we felt that the motivation for bringing the topic up was his disapproval of our work there. It seemed that he was against preserving the memory of the German presence in the area and therefore wanted us to give up documenting the site. On the other hand, however, elderly villagers, who were hoping to establish a heritage project in their village for the benefit of the community, originally led us to the location.

While the predominance of the images of destruction is understandable in the context of the Lapland War, the trouble is that those images can potentially divert popular and scholarly attention from other important issues and questions beyond blazing fires and smoldering ruins. This results in narrow and perhaps slightly misrepresented views on the past. Such powerful images may contribute to the misinformed sense of familiarity with what was going on in Lapland during World War II, although we know little about many important aspects of that period, especially regarding the activities of the German troops in the Lapland's vast wilderness areas.

Our research on the archaeology and heritage of the German military presence in northern Finland has just started. The aim of our future research, however, is to not only address various issues of local interest, but also relate the specific case of northern Finland to the broader international discussions of how people, things, places, representations, and memories are entangled in the context of the modern world and modern conflict.

Conclusion

The presence of German troops in Finland during World War II has been a sensitive and controversial issue for a long time, and different people have taken diverse views on that historical episode and the material remains associated with it. The Finns have been keen to distance their war efforts from those of Nazi Germany ever since the wartime, and this distancing has presumably "naturalized" both the ignorance and cleaning of the German military material from the northern Finnish landscapes. Recently, however, both the general public and heritage professionals have started asking and discussing questions about the value of the "war junk" in the wilderness.

As may be expected, there are various dimensions to and different perceptions of the value of World War II German material culture in Finland. From the heritage perspective, however, the burned-down and largely invisible remains of German sites provide an important source of information, which should not be casually destroyed. Various aspects of the German military presence in northern Finland and its implications to the local people are poorly known from the historical documents: thus. archaeological and ethnographic inquiries and material culture studies can shed light on those matters. Given that World War II represents the relatively recent past, it may appear more familiar and better known in people's minds than it actually is. Furthermore, archaeological research and other forms of engaging with the difficult heritage of the German presence may also help to reconcile with this troubled episode in the recent Finnish past.

Acknowledgements. We wish to thank Cara Tremain for the invitation to the Chacmool conference and all the people met in Calgary: it was great to take some Mongolian steps [sic] again, Evan and Nicole! We thank Antti Peronius for the permission to use his grandfather's wartime photographs, and like to express gratitude to our colleagues who have been involved in the Lapland research over the years. As usual, we are responsible for all errors and misinterpretations. Research is part of the projects "Landscapes of Finnish Conflicts" and "Lapland's Dark Heritage: Understanding the Cultural Legacy of Northern Finland's WWII German Materialities within Interdisciplinary Perspective" (funded Academy of Finland, decision no. 275497).

Notes

¹ We wrote this paper in early 2013 and have not updated it during the lengthy editorial process; for our more recent research on the subject, see Herva et al. 2016, Thomas et al. 2016.

² This situation changed dramatically in fall 2013 after the writing of the paper, when one metal detectorist died and another was seriously injured in an explosion related to disarming artillery grenades in their garage in the northern town of Kemi (see Thomas et al. 2016).

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