

Nazi memorabilia, dark heritage and treasure hunting as “alternative” tourism: Understanding the fascination with the material remains of World War II in Northern Finland

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ABSTRACT

Sites connected to the Second World War (WWII) are increasingly recognized as worthy of archaeological investigation. Researchers are also becoming aware that the collectors market in objects connected to WWII, particularly those connected to Germany, is encouraging the stripping of conflict landscapes in the search for “collectors items.” Finnish Lapland is sometimes regarded as peripheral compared to more centrally located regions of Europe. Archaeologists working here nonetheless find themselves in direct competition with enthusiastic treasure hunters. This is complicated even further by the myriad ontologies employed by different individuals in the construction of their relationship with the material culture connected to recent conflict periods, and on specific “other” or “exotic” landscapes, such as Lapland. This paper examines what might be learnt about the nature of treasure hunting for and trading in WWII material from Lapland, and its position within the emerging research on broader trends in “dark” approaches to and encounters with heritage.

Keywords: treasure hunting, Second World War, Finland, dark heritage, Lapland

Introduction

Cultural heritage researchers have become increasingly interested in the heritage of recent times, including the “dark” or difficult heritage of 20th-century conflicts. While the idea of heritage has long revolved around elite, monumental and aesthetically pleasing things, in more recent times it has been deemed necessary also to understand the negative and painful heritage of war, genocide and the failures of modernity in general (e.g., Logan and Reeves 2008). This is not limited to heritage studies itself, but has spilled noticeably into debates around tourism (Smith and Waterton 2009: 56).

The scope of cultural heritage studies, including the multidisciplinary consideration of archaeological heritage, has broadened and diversified significantly. In addition to the traditional concern of preserving and presenting “important” historical sites and objects, heritage studies are now exploring wider issues such as how and why the past matters in the first place.

We have recognized that heritage values are not transparent or universal, but that there are multiple and often conflicting ideas about heritage. Current research, therefore, seeks to understand the significance of different ways in which we perceive and value things inherited from the past, both tangible and intangible. This means that popular, subaltern and alternative views are relevant to appreciating the meanings of heritage and the role that historical sites and objects play in people’s lives. Heritage, then, is also understood as a community-based matter and not simply defined by expert opinion (e.g., Waterton and Smith 2010), and even problematic, alternative or “outsider” perspectives are increasingly recognized (Wilson 2012).

Contemporary archaeology is also engaging with the study of the modern world and its meaning to contemporary groups (e.g., Kiddey and Schofield 2011). This development stems, on the one hand, from the recognition that many aspects of even a fairly recent past are poorly known and documented. On the other hand, researchers have also realized that archaeology and material culture studies can make an important contribution to—and provide new perspectives on—the modern world and its development in their own right.

The heritage and archaeology of World War II (WWII) and 20th-century conflict more generally have emerged as an important field of research around the world (e.g., Gegner and Ziino 2012; Schofield 2009; Saunders 2012). In addition to the representation and commemoration of war and its effects, current research explores topics such as why people are attracted to objects and places of conflict, pain, suffering and death (Lennon and Foley 2000; Podoshen 2013). This attraction bears links not only to specialized activities like “dark tourism”, but also to broader fascination with, for instance, the Nazis in popular culture such as films and literature (e.g., Rau 2013).

This fascination with “dark heritage” is also demonstrated by the many military artifacts from WWII that appear in online salerooms, highlighting both the commercial interest and the potential for objects to reach these salerooms by illicit means. Accounts of high profile scandals such as the infamous faked Hitler diaries (see Harris 2009) demonstrate the degree of obsession that can exist among certain collectors, but also the high level of public interest in Nazi paraphernalia.

The WWII German heritage in Finnish Lapland (FIG. 1) provides an excellent case study for exploring the values and meanings of dark heritage, not only locally but also globally and from a theoretical perspective. It enables us to address the relationships between the modern war, material culture, memory and the question of identity from multiple viewpoints.

This contributes to wider discussions concerning how heritage professionals, including archaeologists, might consider the ways in which they respond and react to non-professional perspectives on the past (and see Thomas 2015), by shedding light on “alternative” perspectives and activities. Furthermore, as has been explored elsewhere (Herva 2014), the particular perceptions of Lapland as “exotic” and even “magical” or “enchanted”, may also have a particular influence on the way in which portable (and tradable) material from the region is perceived. In this paper then, we first introduce the issue of “looting” and treasure hunting more broadly in an international context, before positioning this phenomenon within the context of Lapland. After introducing the specific historical background to the German material culture which is found in abundance in Lapland, we discuss the apparent fascination with this materiel through the lenses of dark heritage and dark tourism studies. Finally, we discuss exploratory netnography (ethnographic research of online interactions; sometimes also called “e-ethnography”, “virtual ethnography”, “online ethnography” or “digital ethnography” [Poynter 2010: 246]). Here we discuss netnographic data collated from several relevant online discussion forums in Finland, with reference to particular incidents through news reports and other supplementary information.

Figure 1 Top: Location of Finnish Lapland; Bottom: Overgrown German barracks in Lapland (illustration by O. Seitsonen).

Treasure hunting with metal detectors

Artifact collecting activities in the wilderness in Lapland often seem to involve the use of the metal detector; a tool which has encouraged “alternative” interactions with the cultural environment. The publicly available metal detector, and the hobbyist treasure hunting that it has enabled, has had a

significant impact on archaeological heritage in many parts of the world. The activities of hobbyists using metal detectors can be regarded in some cases as an asset to archaeological research. For example metal detecting has been utilized as a survey tool in the sub-discipline of conflict archaeology in countries such as the USA and the UK for a number of years (Scott 1997; Pollard 2009). Ferguson (2013) has suggested that metal detectorists that can be considered hobbyists as participating in “serious leisure,” due to the level of time and financial commitment required to pursue the activity.

However, there is also an unlawful side to metal detecting. Cases of illegal metal detecting have fed into the criminal trafficking networks connected to the illegal antiquities market. Material from Estonia for example, looted using metal detectors, has turned up at auction in Germany, suggesting transnational movement of material from this so-called “black archaeology” (Ulst 2010: 161–163). Instances of illegal metal detecting have even directly influenced changes in legislation to prohibit the pastime further, as occurred in the aftermath of the discovery of the Derrynaflan Hoard in Ireland (Kelly 1994: 214).

Due to the intrusive nature of metal detecting, and not least because of illegal activities, there are inevitable debates around the ethics of metal detecting, and of archaeologists who engage with metal detecting enthusiasts. Dobat (2013: 705) has identified the “ethical dilemma” of metal detecting for archaeologists, since “although the metal detector may pose a potential threat, it has also become an important source of scientific knowledge, public legitimization, and popular recognition.” Notwithstanding “success stories” of collaborative projects involving metal detectorists such as the Portable Antiquities Scheme in England and Wales, and even doctoral-level research involving metal-detected finds data (e.g., Brindle 2013; Robbins 2013), others have been very uneasy about engaging with detectorists, dismissing acknowledgement of the hobby as unethical (e.g., Fowler 2007: 97). Nonetheless, there is also increasing acknowledgement that characterizing artifact hunters (including metal detectorists) as “looters” may carry “a negative connotation and is imbued with the heritage values of archaeologists and preservationists” (Hart and Chilton 2015: 319). This in turn has limited the research, to date, on the activities of metal detectorists as a form of “alternative” heritage engagement.

Most of the research published that attempts to characterize more broadly the different stages in the trading and trafficking of looted artifacts, from extraction from the ground through transit and dealing and to the final sales (such as Campbell 2013; Polk 2014), have focused almost exclusively on what might be regarded as “high-end” antiquities. In other words, those cultural objects that are considered the most collectible and desirable, and can fetch significantly high prices at auction houses and are often purchased by wealthy private collectors and museums (e.g., Watson and Todeschini 2006; Felch and Frammolino 2011). Conversely, aside from occasional “jackpot” discoveries such as the Wanborough Hoard (Thomas 2009a), and the Salisbury Hoard (Stead 1998), both found in southern England, much of what hobbyist metal-detector users uncover tends to be of far less rarity or financial value than would attract such buyers. Thus, for the illicit side of metal detecting, there is a relative dearth of reliable information on how the actual market in metal-detected finds operates. Furthermore, the hobbyist nature of metal detecting, along with the nature of engagement with cultural heritage itself, especially dark heritage, mean that the motivations for the market itself are more complex than they may first appear. The interface between legal and illegal metal detecting needs be explored further and in ways that are more nuanced than simply considering markets and networks of trade.

Finland is rarely regarded as a “source” country for illicit cultural objects. In fact generally, Finland is regarded as having some of the lowest levels of criminality and corruption (van Dijk 2007: 45, 47), and this in turn might suggest that metal detecting seen in the context of criminality and corruption would also exhibit lower levels of criminality related to illegal excavations at archaeological sites than in certain other countries. However, Seitsonen and Herva (2011) have indicated that looting of archaeological sites with metal detectors can, and does, happen.

Furthermore, there are indicators that the hobby in Finland is growing and recently there has been some academic interest in understanding the hobbyists themselves (e.g., Immonen and Kinnunen 2014, Siltainsuu and Wessman 2014). As of yet, however, the majority of information available on metal detecting in Finland is anecdotal rather than based on empirical evidence.

The German material culture in Finnish Lapland

Finnish Lapland is rich in German military material culture for historical reasons. Finland came to cooperate with Germany after the three-month “Winter War” against the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1940. Up to 200,000 German troops were concentrated in Finland, mainly in the northern parts of the country, between 1941 and 1945. The presence of German troops in Finland was part of Hitler’s 1941 attack on the Soviet Union, but the northern front became stationary soon after the launch of Operation Barbarossa, and German troops engaged in activities other than active warfare. In addition to major garrisons near several northern Finnish towns such as Kemi and Oulu, the Germans had all kinds of military sites, from substantial fortifications to supply depots and labor camps, in different parts of Lapland.

The Soviet Union launched a major assault on Finland in the summer of 1944 and forced the country into a cease-fire treaty which stipulated that the German troops were to leave Finland in an unrealistically quick schedule. Although not unprepared, the evacuation of the great number of troops and enormous quantities of munition was a Herculean task for the Germans in the difficult environment of Lapland, and increasing Soviet pressure encouraged Finns to turn against their former “brothers-in-arms” who were retreating across Finnish Lapland to northernmost Norway. The German troops resorted to “scorched earth” tactics during the so-called Lapland War (1944–1945), inflicting large-scale destruction on property in northern Finland. The Germans also torched their own military sites, planted explosives in the landscape, and left behind huge quantities of destroyed military material that they were unable to evacuate (FIG. 2).

There are thousands of former German military sites in the Lapland wilderness, but in general little remains above the ground, aside from more or less inconspicuous fragments of buildings and earthworks. Shortly after the war de-mining took place, and some of the German material was cleared, but explosives are still commonly found (Ahlman et al. 2007: 28), and decaying military material is present in many places. This abundance of military material culture in the wilderness has always been well known within (northern) Finland and people have encountered and engaged with German things in diverse ways over the post-war decades. At the same time, however, these wartime materialities attracted little broader interest and were largely ignored in public and intentionally forgotten about until the 2000s, when an environmental organization launched a project to clear up the “war junk” from the wilderness (see Heinäaho and Rautiainen 2011; Herva 2014).

Figure 2 Burned German WWII materiel in the wilderness (photograph by O. Seitsonen).

The environmental project elicited diverse responses and sparked public discussion on the values and meanings of the material heritage of the German military presence in Lapland during WWII. This discussion has indicated, and perhaps increased the awareness, that the previously neglected “war junk” has historical and heritage value. It has become more generally recognized, firstly, that the material heritage of the German military presence includes dangerous explosives and, second, that both explosives and WWII memorabilia in Lapland attract treasure hunters and collectors to a greater degree than previously realized.

Despite this, very little is currently known about the scale and nature of the looting of German sites in northern Finland, and about the collecting and markets of military objects originating from Finnish Lapland specifically. The evidence of unauthorized digging has not been systematically documented but is not

uncommon at former German military sites (FIG. 3). Various Internet websites provide some insights into “alternative” engagements with the German material heritage in Lapland, including metal detecting, collecting and trading. A recent accident in the northern Finnish town of Kemi (see below) tragically illustrated the more dangerous aspect of the fascination with WWII memorabilia; a metal detectorist was killed when disassembling a grenade and the police investigation revealed that the victim had discovered and collected dozens of wartime explosives which he kept in his garage (Yle 2013a; 2013b).

Dark heritage, (dark) tourism and hunting for WWII memorabilia in Finnish Lapland

Dark tourism focuses on places of death, violence, suffering, trauma and destruction, ranging from catastrophe areas like Chernobyl/Pripyat to sites of assassination and places of black metal violence in Norway (including church burnings, murders, suicides and expressions of national socialism, all associated with the music and art genre “black metal” [Podoshen 2013]). As may be expected, places of war and wartime atrocities, such as concentration camps, feature prominently in dark tourism and dark tourism studies (e.g., Beech 2000). Dark tourism studies, and dark tourism itself, has been on the rise over the 2000s, but an understanding of the motivations and different dimensions of dark tourism is still developing. Dark tourism is often conceived as fascination with death—and hence labeled “thanatourism”—but the phenomenon is undoubtedly more complex or multi-faceted and fuelled by varied motivations, including a search for new experiences and adventure (e.g., Podoshen 2013: 265). Indeed, if considered as “negative” tourism, it is also connected with commemoration of remembrance of catastrophic events or simply voyeurism (e.g., Meskell 2002: 558).

Dark tourism—a “rather emotive” term for the “phenomenon by which people visit, purposefully or as part of a broader recreational itinerary, the diverse range of sites, attractions and exhibitions which offer a (re)presentation of death and suffering” (Stone 2006: 146)—has been subject to increasing interest and discussion since the late 1990s (e.g., Lennon and Foley 2000). These studies may provide some insights into the character and motivation of metal detecting practices and collecting militaria, both in general, but perhaps especially in the context of Lapland and eastern front settings in the Russian wilderness.

Lapland is widely known as an exotic tourist destination with Northern wonders ranging from the Aurora Borealis to Santa Claus. Tourism is a major economic activity in Northern Finland. The cultural perceptions of the North as “other” that are at the heart of Lapland tourism, arguably also have an impact on the way that metal detecting enthusiasts experience their hobby in Lapland. In addition to this “northern exoticism”, applying a “dark tourism approach” also recognizes that the broadly experiential aspects of metal detecting are potentially relevant to understanding the attraction of hunting for militaria in Lapland. This means that metal detectorists’ activities involve much more than merely locating sellable goods, and the markets for militaria must also be considered against the cultural images of Lapland. Nonetheless, objects connected to WWII are openly sold in Lapland, including various metal detectorists’ finds (FIG. 4).

Figure 3 Metal detectorists’ “excavation” on the edge of a German WWII barrack foundation (photograph by O. Seitsonen).

The richness of wartime heritage makes Finnish Lapland an attractive target to WWII militaria hunters (Seitsonen and Herva 2011: 178). Recent focus on the highly controversial National Geographic Channel-commissioned program *Nazi War Diggers* has also led some to call for greater awareness of the “dark trade in Nazi memorabilia and the treasure hunting which feeds that market” (Pollard and Banks 2014: 52). But while generic and commonsensical assumptions about the motivations of treasure hunting and collecting German (or other WWII) memorabilia are easy to make, these activities may not be properly understood in ideological terms of Nazi sympathies or the prospect of economic gain (Carr 2014: 22, 28). At least some

activities revolving around German militaria might, for instance, speak of a “fan culture” around Nazis and WWII, a form of engaging with the contemporary popular-culture representations of and fascination with Nazis, rather than adhering to the real historical Nazis (see Kingsepp 2006).

It is also worth noticing, as regards the character of WWII German sites in Lapland, that dark tourism arguably favors the visual and experiential over historic (Podoshen 2013: 265), which fits well into the character of Lapland’s WWII sites. A sense of adventure and a thrill of discovering things in the ground—rather than knowing the past in a scientific sense—are arguably central to why archaeology appeals to people (Holtorf 2004: 47), and can also inspire metal detector hobbyists (Thomas 2012: 53).

Tourism studies have long recognized that people always bring with them a set of ideas and assumptions to the sites they visit, and those preconceptions in turn affect how the sites are interpreted and experienced (see for example Light’s 2009 study of tourists to Transylvania). This also applies to treasure hunters visiting former military sites and is perhaps particularly relevant in the context of Lapland, given that Lapland has long been subject to diverse cultural perceptions, projections and fantasies (cf. Herva 2014). In the European imagination, the northern margins of Europe are something of a blank slate on which all kinds of hopes, fears, expectations and fantasies can be, and have been, projected for centuries. As Londen and colleagues (2007: 93) note, the mysterious and relatively unknown nature of Lapland as a tourist destination, even in the 1930s, made it “almost frightening”, although its potential as a site for tourism was also increasingly recognized. Lapland has been regarded as a pristine wilderness and an undeveloped periphery, an exotic land of wonders and magic as well as an empty land waiting to be rationally exploited. The German troops in Finland were not simply “evil Nazis”, but Finland and Finns had a rather more complicated relationship with Germans during the war, which enables signifying the material heritage of the German presence in Lapland in multiple ways, and not just through the lens of “dark tourism.” What all this suggests is that the treasure hunting at German military sites, although a form of engaging with dark heritage and material remains of a difficult past, involves more than a fascination with “real-world” war and death; there is an element of imagination and fantasy to these engagements.

Figure 4 Material, including weapons, connected to the WWII German military presence in Lapland, are displayed for sale alongside other miscellaneous items in a vintage store in Rovaniemi (photograph by O. Seitsonen).

The perceptions of and attitudes to the German military material culture in Northern landscapes are, nonetheless, varied. Although the dividing lines between different views and opinions are not straightforward, our media studies and interviews would appear to indicate that non-locals (or tourists in a broad sense) are more troubled by the presence of “war junk” in Lapland landscapes than the local residents. This is presumably due to the persistent image of Lapland as an unspoiled wilderness where signs of the human presence are considered intrusive elements, which do not “belong” to such an environment. Locals—and the indigenous Sámi reindeer herders in particular—would appear to have a rather different attitude to the military material culture decaying in northern landscapes partly because they consider it as “their” heritage, but also because Lapland environments comprise not a natural but a cultural landscape to them.

This landscape is composed of diverse human and non-human elements with myriad cultural meanings and inhabited by various human and non-human beings, including spirits, ghosts and other such entities that are sometimes also associated with places where military materialities are present (Herva 2014). In the local view, then, the material traces of the German military presence are a component of a historically layered and meaningful environment rather than “nature” in the modernist sense. Indeed, traditional Sámi and Finnish cosmologies and modes of perceiving the environment are not ordered around binary nature/culture, subject/object or natural/supernatural categories to begin with, but are characterized by

what might be called a relational understanding of the world (Ingold 2000; Herva 2014). Seen against this background, the apparently casual and pragmatic attitude of many northerners towards the German military material decaying in Lapland landscapes makes more sense.

Treasure hunting in Lapland

Although the Lapland tourism industry has for the most part purposefully chosen to ignore—rather than make economic, tourism-related use of—the material heritage of the German troops, it is possible to identify thematic links between tourism and treasure hunting at WWII sites. The Lapland tourism industry eagerly taps into the cultural images of exoticism, otherness and adventure associated with the northern margins of Europe, and (illicit) engagements with the dark heritage of WWII have similar aspects to them. The neglected material heritage of the German military presence decaying in the wilderness potentially provokes excitement and a sense of strangeness. The actual sites where German military things are found are characterized by “liminality” and haunting uncertainty: the destroyed sites show only a ghostly presence of their former selves, blending in with the surrounding landscape to varying degrees. Hence, the visual and perceptual qualities of German sites—the simultaneous presence and absence of the German material heritage—may be taken to “invite” people to explore sites, discover things and promote a sense of adventure (Herva 2014), not dissimilarly from what has been argued for industrial ruins (Edensor 2005).

Rasmussen (2014: 85–86) has noted that hobbyist metal detectorists acknowledge themselves as having different motivations from dealers and collectors of artifacts, and several qualitative studies of metal detectorists have shown that it is indeed the experiential element of searching for material—from various periods, not just WWII—that explains the appeal of the hobby for many (Thomas 2009b: 264). This visual and experiential approach would also appear to apply particularly well to how former German sites in Lapland are experienced, due to the very material characteristics of those sites on the one hand, and their broader historical-cultural-environmental context on the other. Likewise, the organized (albeit unofficial) “treasure hunting tourism” (or even “looting tourism”) of the eastern front sites in the Russian wilderness, evidenced by numerous online discussion forums for metal detector enthusiasts, has a similar, but even stronger, dimension of adventure. There is also a resonance with the idea of venturing into a liminal space which is distant and different from the ordinary everyday world.

Artifact hunting at German sites in Lapland and trading the objects retrieved from them may well be a straightforward (albeit small-time?) business to some, whereas others are perhaps likely to signify treasure-hunted things—whether found by themselves or bought/traded from others (see Carr 2014: 54–55 for the significance of militaria object provenance, the association with original owners or finders, for collectors)—in much less obvious and more complex ways.

Recognizing this is central to contextualizing and understanding the supply and markets of war memorabilia. It is known, for example, that there are volunteer groups in the far north of Lapland that spend their time searching for the remains of fallen soldiers, in both Finland but also across the border in Russia, in order to see them repatriated. These groups are organized through a national “Association for Cherishing the Memory of the Dead of the War”, supported by the Finnish Government (http://www.sotavainajat.net/in_english). Comparable groups also exist in Russia (Ash 2014) and Latvia (e.g., <https://kurlandlegends.wordpress.com/>), and often seem to adopt a narrative of “rescuing” the remains before “black diggers” move in for more commercial purposes. Beyond stereotypical assumptions though, at present little is actually known what motivates the looting of German sites in Lapland.

Much of the treasure hunting is probably done by amateur hobbyists and the character of the trade in militaria is likely quite different from the professional antiques trade. This should be kept in mind when

trying to understand the character and nature of illicit trade in memorabilia (retrieved from Lapland and more generally). Indeed, the illicit acquiring of memorabilia can be considered “amateur” or “tourist” activity in several senses: unprofessional (hobby); an activity of dark tourism; and an alternative form of engaging with WWII heritage. This raises the question of what motivates dark tourism in the first place. Lapland can be seen as a place of tourism, which relates to “war junk” in two ways since tourism is linked to how militaria has been perceived and treated after the war, and also because Lapland as an (exotic) place for tourists has colored perceptions of it for a long time. There may be resonance to treasure hunting in this context; metal detectorists in southern Finland, and even from further afield in such as Switzerland and Germany, for instance, appear to value the possibility of metal detecting in Lapland. This may be linked to the richness of finds, but conceivably also to the attractiveness of “exotic” Lapland.

The character of sites in Lapland may, in theory, be taken to promote a sense of mystery which resonates with cultural images of Lapland as an enchanted land; thus, Nazis and Nazi heritage in the North potentially converges with broader fantasies of the magical North, perhaps underlining the attractiveness of Lapland’s sites as treasure hunting targets. This would be particularly relevant for outsiders, of course, but there is also a sense of mystery to sites for some locals; the strangeness of sites in the wilderness may be taken to invite engagement and exploration, which emphasizes the sense of discovery and adventure. It is possible, assuming that the collectors and owners of German military material are interested in provenance, that Lapland’s “magical” status and the fascination that the Arctic holds, could also be an important consideration in deciding the desirability and even monetary value of this material in its status as “collector’s items.”

A netnographic survey of Lapland’s WWII Heritage

We carried out a preliminary netnographic survey of selected Finnish websites and one international internet discussion forum, all of which deal broadly with Lapland’s WWII heritage, observed in the landscape and as “collectibles.” The term “netnography” essentially refers to “ethnography online” (Kozinets 2010: 4), and for the purposes of this paper we employed netnography in collecting examples of online discussions connected to the WWII material in Lapland, and how it is perceived or used. Since the WWII material heritage in Finland, and also in Russia (where some of Lapland’s WWII conflict landscapes are now situated), is at least nominally protected by various laws, such as the law against violation of grave peace (Finnish law: chapter 17/§ 12), collecting this material can be a rather sensitive issue, which may affect the extent to which it is discussed openly. The surveyed Finnish forums discussing Lapland’s finds cover the time period from 2004 to 2013. Altogether 45 online news and discussions were reviewed (TABLE 1). In addition to these domestic sites there are several international sites, for example addressing material found on Russian territory (such as www.warrelics.eu), but for the purposes of this paper we will focus on the Finnish forums and websites. In order to preserve the anonymity of individual discussants at the forums, we do not quote anything verbatim from the websites in this paper, but instead discuss the emerging themes on a broader level.

Where we make quotations from the websites, these are translated to English from the original Finnish by one of the authors. This analysis, while at an early stage of our research as a whole, yielded a number of clear observations. Metal detectorists in Finland, as seems to be the case elsewhere as well (e.g., Deckers 2012), keep sometimes extensive personal collections of artifacts that they have discovered. Seemingly via the online discussions, many like to show their finds to peers in order to receive compliments. The theme of monetary value of finds recurs periodically, and the estimates for prices usually cite international websites although there is also some mention of asking professional estimates from antique shops. The

actual transactions and sales of finds seem to be discussed away from public view, as indicated by requests to move to private messaging within discussion threads at certain points.

Occasionally too, some individuals post messages offering to buy militaria. It is unclear from the interactions whether these individuals are “middlemen” (dealers looking to sell on to higher end dealers or collectors), or whether they are themselves collectors. This might indicate some correlation with Carr’s (2014: 54–55) observations in the Channel Islands that, while some people do collect objects found by others, the greatest “value” (indicated by the showing of finds for compliments online) may be attributed to objects that have been discovered personally. With regard to the trade that may exist in Lapland or concerning material from Lapland (and Finland more generally), there is no direct indication from the forums analyzed so far of how well organized this is, although planned further research in this area, for example through deep interviews with members of Lapland’s metal detecting community, may shed more light.

Of the websites we discuss in this paper, suomi24.fi is a very popular general forum—and in fact has an unusually long history for such forums, having been founded as early as 1998, with an astonishing 1.9 million visitors every month (according to the “Citizen Mindscapes” project [<http://challenge.helsinki.fi/blog/citizen-mindscapes-kansakunnan-mielentila>]). Active since 2007, the Aarremaanalla.com discussion forum is the country’s main metal detectorists website (Aarre maan alla translates to “Treasure underground”). The rest of the forums we surveyed relate to hiking, traveling and scale modeling. All Finnish newspapers’ websites were also surveyed for discussions and news relating to the WWII heritage in Lapland. Finally, we also reviewed the websites of the “Pidä Lappi Siistinä” organization (“Keep Lapland Tidy” [<http://www.pidalappisiistina.fi/>]) and Lapland Society for Military History (www.lapinsotahistoriallinenseura.fi).

It is notable that on these Finnish websites, as well as others based outside of Finland for which we made a cursory study, discussants refer to collecting (and treasure hunting, depending on the viewpoint) in a subtle, “between-the-lines” manner. Only on aarremaanalla.com are participants more open about asking the exchange and monetary value of their finds. Here they proudly exhibit their finds to their peers.

There are changes over time in the nature of the internet discussions. The earliest discussions that we found related to Lapland’s WWII heritage and finds are from 2004 on the hiking forum. These discussions concentrated generally on locating and visiting the WWII sites, and often also on sensing the “special spirit” of these localities as a (dark) part of the landscape, supporting the connections to “dark tourism” discussed above.

From 2005 onwards “Pidä Lappi siistinä” started actively clearing “war junk” from the wilderness. In this phase, there were discussions concerning whether all the material remains of WWII should be cleared away, and whether they had any value beyond their financial value as scrap metal. These arguments even resulted in physical interventions to stop the organization’s activities (e.g., Kaleva 2006a), and in rumors of the “Pidä Lappi siistinä” organizers gathering the best preserved finds separately, to sell them secretly to memorabilia collectors (Yle 2010a).

Over time online discussions seem to turn thematically to the role of metal detectorists and collecting, either for discussants’ own collections or for exchange from 2008. This awareness is also reflected in the news from that time (e.g., Lapin Kansa 2010; Yle 2010b). Of the metal detecting forums, aarremaanalla.com seemed (during our period of monitoring) to be the most active for discussions of WWII finds and their monetary value. On the other hand, the longevity of the metal detecting hobby is also shown by the reminiscence of some discussants, who refer to detecting and collecting German memorabilia in Lapland since the mid-1980s (although there were only very few metal detectorists active in Finland at that point).

All the discussants on the forums seem careful in censoring their identities through usernames and by obscuring their faces in posted images, possibly acknowledging that they are aware of the illegal aspects of their activities. Many discussants realize the potential dangers of digging up unexploded ordnance (UXO), although as noted above, some do collect this highly volatile material. In the case of the Kemi tragedy mentioned earlier, the police report indicated that the one survivor of the explosion stated that they had collected the UXO by themselves over the last two years with a metal detector, had not bought or sold any of them, and planned to use all of them solely as personal interior decorations at their home (Kaleva 2013a). However, several of the UXO in the published police photographs from the scene (Yle 2013c) are at least analogous to, if not exactly the same as, items exhibited in photographs taken by anonymous detectorists in 2008. These were published on one internet forum between 2008 and 2009, but were removed after news of the explosion became known.

Table 1 Number of discussions involving metal detecting and treasure hunting of WWII material in Finnish online discussion forums

Due to the extreme winters of Lapland, situated mostly above the Arctic Circle, the length of the metal detecting “season” is only brief. The thermal winter can last for more than 200 days per year, with the snowless season from late-May to mid-October and the period without ground frost even shorter. If the statement given to the police about acquiring the UXOs over a two-year period is accurate, this means the individual would have had to locate approximately one UXO per day, metal detecting full time. This may be plausible, for example if a cache of many UXOs was found, but it is impossible to verify whether this could have been the case, or instead, be evidence of active trading in this material.

In the wake of the explosion, even the Finnish interior minister asked the police to consider whether they should start monitoring internet and other sales of wartime ordnance (Kaleva 2013b). According to the spokesman of the Finnish Weapon Historical Society (Asehistoriallinen Seura), Esa Salldén, the demand for miscellaneous militaria, such as disarmed ordnance, has been on the rise since the tightening of weapons permit laws in Finland. Before then it was easier for people to own wartime weaponry (Kaleva 2013c; 2013d). Salldén claims to have never heard of anyone selling their metal-detected finds, but states that the selling of militaria takes place within small circles or by individuals (e.g., Aamulehti 2013). The financial potential of ordnance was also noted in headlines connected to the Kemi explosion: “Ammo that can be found in the northern forests up for sale” (Kaleva 2013c) and “Money attracts the search for explosive wartime ammunition” (Helsingin Sanomat 2013, both our translation from the original Finnish).

In many discussions on the *aarremaanalla.com* forum, detectorists show what they have found and included into their personal collections. Forum discussants regularly ask for further proof of the authenticity of finds shown on the forum. There are also some open requests to buy militaria; as mentioned above, people frequently ask for contact information to be sent in private messages in order to keep their privacy.

Nazi memorabilia and human remains

Apparently in Finland, as elsewhere (for instance in discussions at the *warrelics.eu* forum), items related especially to Nazis, particularly those exhibiting swastikas and connected to SS troops, are much sought after. Discussants estimate the value of WWII Totenkopf (death’s head) rings at several hundred euros, and an actual SS-Ehrenring at several thousand.

Some also talk about getting professional price estimates from antiques dealers in this context. In one case the finder of a Totenkopf ring inquired online regarding its monetary value, and stated that he was not

currently willing to sell his find, but maybe would do later on at auction. Other users asked to be informed if the ring was going to be put up for sale. The same person also inquired about the value of a German helmet that he had found, gave details about where he had found it, and listed other finds that he had made at the same location. He also said that he had found bones and at least claimed that those were handed over to the authorities for “DNA sampling.” Another discussant congratulated him for the “proper” treatment of human remains.

In this case, the presence of human remains and their handing over to the authorities seemed to interest the other discussants from a perspective of validating the finds as real, since some doubts were presented earlier in the discussion of their originality and affiliations. People asked, for example, for photographs of the find location as a proof of provenance. One person also asked for a private email address for inquiries of prices, and another, perhaps jokingly, inquired about buying the “Jerrie’s bones” to get them into the churchyard—in this case the finder urged the latter person to “keep matter-of-factual.”

Grim rumors about the sales of WWII human remains have circulated in Lapland at least since the 1980s, and one discussant at vaellusnet.com mentions offhandedly that in the past collectors used to pay 500 Finnish marks for a skull (approximately 80€). Finding and selling WWII skeletons of Soviet Union Red Army soldiers from the iconic Raatteentie battlefield has even made its way into a popular humorous novel about a Finnish collector (Paasilinna 1994: *Volomari Volotisen ensimmäinen vaimo ynnä muuta vanhaa tavaraa*; in English: “Volomari Volotinen’s First Wife and Assorted Other Old Items”).

An ex-military officer who acted as a special advisor to the “war junk” clearing campaigns has described, in several media interviews, incidents where metal detectorists have disturbed marked graves in Lapland in their search for artifacts. He also suggested that detectorists frequently sell their finds through the international internet forums, and it is rumored that the sellers often state that their finds originate from Russia in order to conceal where they have really been dug up. This considerably complicates the verification of numerous anecdotal stories about metal detectorists and collectors (Aamulehti 2008; Helsingin Sanomat 2013). The suggestion made in these reports that detectorists may travel from southern Finland to hunt for WWII materiel in Lapland corroborates with information from detectorists in southern Finland that were interviewed by one of the authors, Thomas, in 2013. Several of the individuals interviewed indicated either that they had been on detecting expeditions to Lapland, or that it was a “dream” of theirs to do so. Analogous stories about the involvement of foreign collectors in the treasure hunting for and selling of militaria finds from Lapland were also discussed in 2014 news reports related to the illicit collecting of UXO (MTV3 2014a; 2014b).

Conclusions

It is far from clear whether people who hunt for and collect WWII memorabilia, including volatile and inherently dangerous UXOs, in and from Lapland, all have similar motivations. It seems likely that different aspects of this activity appeal to different individuals. Clearly, certain commonalities that seem true of metal detecting and treasure hunting in most places exist here as well. These include apparent pride in, and the keeping of, personal collections, and awareness that provenance (whether real or created) is important in contexts such as negotiating sales and impressing fellow hobbyists. Equally, while the structure is still unclear, some sort of network exists through which trading of metal-detected and otherwise treasure-hunted material takes place.

There are also, conceivably, several reasons as to why Lapland attracts treasure hunters of WWII heritage in addition to the sheer richness of German military material culture in the wilderness. The very environmental and cultural setting of Lapland is perhaps a relevant factor for understanding why Lapland

attracts treasure hunters, and what the searching of WWII sites on the north-eastern margins of Europe is about.

This is suggested in the indications that treasure hunters active in Lapland can include local residents, but (crucially) also those traveling from further afield in order to hunt for material in this particular setting. Perhaps then, treasure hunting in Lapland, or some aspects of it, should be understood in the broader context of, first, fascination with dark heritage and tourism in general (especially concerning the connection with WWII), and, second, against the environmental and cultural setting of “exotic” Lapland. It should be useful to frame treasure hunting and trading of metal-detected WWII artifacts from Lapland in different terms than simply economic, in order to provide some new perspectives. Can the treasure hunting in this region be understood also as some kind of (alternative or outsider) tourism; alternative engagement with heritage; doing a wild thing in a wild land with connotations of adventure and liminality?

The reasons why people search for artifacts at WWII sites and are attracted to Nazi-related artifacts in particular are probably misunderstood if considered narrowly in terms of trade; to put treasure hunting and trade properly in perspective, it is necessary to put it in a broader context. Equally, a sense of connection with the wartime Germans themselves, motivations for treasure hunting, trading and collecting military are far from clear and thus one should not make too many assumptions about what these activities really mean. For instance, it should not be assumed that treasure hunting and collecting and trade are about Nazi sympathies or simple economics, or that particular political ideologies may be at play. As some of the online interactions suggest, place, for example for proving provenance, is important. As we have suggested, the consideration of dark tourism may be a useful means of framing engagements with the material remains from WWII to be found in Lapland. Our research into this region and this particular phenomenon is far from complete, with more in depth research planned. Yet with this paper we hope we have shed light on the possibility of many different types of encounters and engagements with this particular type of cultural heritage in this particular geographical (and temporal) context. We have also suggested the potential richness of data that can be gleaned from understanding these many alternative encounters and engagements, and what these implications are for understanding both the archaeology and its myriad meanings and significances.

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