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Performing Memory, Challenging History: Two Adaptations of The Unknown Soldier

Julia Pajunen and Hanna Korsberg

In Finnish culture Väinö Linna’s novel The Unknown Soldier (Tuntematon sotilas, 1954) has provided a dominant narrative of Finland’s role in the Second World War. In this article we discuss how two interpretations of the novel – a theatre production and a radio play – engage with Finland’s social and political realities by representing history and challenging the memory culture of war, especially with regard to masculinity and violence. Written and directed by Kristian Smeds, the theatre production was given the same title as the novel and performed at the Finnish National Theatre for a 26-month period during 2007–09. The radio play was called The Unknown Soldier: A Dialogue with Linna’s Novel. It was written by Jussi Moila and directed by Juhana von Bagh for the Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yle) in 2014.

The topics in Finnish culture discussed here are also important questions in an international context for all nations that are re-examining their difficult pasts and how they are subsequently represented in cultural artefacts. Indeed, our examples show how these national narratives can be challenged in an effective way through performance. The political character of theatre is ‘an institution deeply embedded in a given historical context and subject to historical change, but also to a large extent dependent on the audience, their current interests, frame of mind, cognitive capacities and dominant convictions’.

Since the end of the Cold War and especially since the dawn of the new millennium, there has been a memory boom with various narratives about the Second World War presented in theatrical productions around Europe. The productions by Smeds and by Juhana von Bagh and Jussi Moila, which challenged Finnish historians to take up questions too long left unaddressed, can be seen as part of that boom. Väinö Linna set his novel in the so-called Continuation War, as the 1941–44 phase of the Second World War fought between Finland and the Soviet Union is known in Finland (the earlier phase, 1939–1940, is known as the Winter War). However,

1. Kristian Smeds (b. 1970) is a Finnish theatre director and playwright with a distinguished national and international career. He was the first Nordic theatre director to be awarded the XII European Theatre Prize for New Theatrical Realities (2011). Juhana von Bagh (b. 1982) is a Finnish theatre director working as a freelancer since 2012. Jussi Moila (b. 1981) is a Finnish playwright, dramaturge, and theatre director.


4. In Finland, a total of five different productions of The Unknown Soldier took place during the years 2007 to 2014. Besides the two productions examined here, Juha Hurme directed The Unknown Soldier at Jyväskylä Municipal Theatre in 2006, Mika Myllyaho at Ryhmäteatteri in 2007–08, and Lauri Maijala at Oulu Municipal Theatre in 2014.

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The Unknown Soldier is not a novel about that specific war; rather it is about men in war generally. The novel was considered a radical, micro-historical narrative of the conflict told from the perspective of an ordinary soldier who fought in the war. The Unknown Soldier can in fact be compared to All Quiet on the Western Front: both novels are based on the authors’ personal experiences of war and both enjoyed great popularity in the post-war era.

We argue that Linna’s novel, although controversial for its realistic portrayal of Finnish soldiers’ behaviour, was still very mild in its pacifist tone and in criticism of the war, whereas the productions by Smeds and von Bagh and Moila were highly critical of war and of the use of violence in conflict. By rewriting the classic, these directors deconstructed the heroism of Finnish soldiers, which characterized the novel, and questioned its nationalism. They challenged Finnish historians’ views of the conflict and shifted social and political realities in Finland. In making their interpretations both productions used postmodern recycling (defined below) and a combination of elements from contemporary and popular culture, interweaving documentary images and videos with material from the novel. By using intermediality, the directors commented on the novel, its adaptations and its production history, as they moved between novel, film, stage production, and documentary material.

We are using the concepts of memory and memory culture – that is, how the past is remembered – because of the particular performances on which we have chosen to focus. History and performance can both be seen as representations of the past that shape our understanding and identity. They also share a relation to time: both history and performance happen in relation to the present; both interpret the past through contemporary interests and questions. In this discussion, we acknowledge the difference between the past and history as recognized in postmodern historical writing, but, as Keith Jenkins has pointed out, the past, in order to exist, depends on representations and representers producing histories; as he puts it, no representations, no past.

We analyse interpretations of history through the concept of collective cultural memory. In our analysis, collective cultural memory consists of objectified culture: the texts, rites, images, buildings, and monuments that are designed to recall fateful events in the history of the collective. In this sense, collective memories originate from shared communications about the meaning of the past and are floated in the life-worlds of individuals who partake in the communal life of the respective collective. This historical memory helps to create a shared past and a perception of unity. Memories, as we know, are selective, but they also organize people’s imagination of the past.

By examining the theatrical adaptations of the novel, we are able to discuss issues of cultural memory in new and innovative ways. To argue our case, we will address the position of Linna’s The Unknown Soldier in Finnish culture, then look at the theatrical adaptations of his tale before turning to our analysis of the two selected productions. We spend a greater proportion of this article discussing the adaptation by Smeds because it triggered a re-evaluation of the novel; von Bagh and Moila’s version took this process further. The choice of a familiar and canonical text allowed the production teams to play with the audiences’ expectations. In a Finnish context it is reasonable to expect the audience to know the original text. Indeed, this prior knowledge also allows the producers to create an extraordinary layer between the narrative of the war story and contemporary society. The copyright holders, Linna’s children, gave the production team the freedom to rewrite the text. In both interpretations this freedom was crucial: the team rewrote and updated the story in ways that will be discussed below. The use of well-known classics can be used to facilitate engagement with the audience – its knowledge, memories, and expectations. The process of recognition and remembrance becomes part of the pleasure.

The Unknown Soldiers

Soon after The Unknown Soldier was published in 1954, the novel was designated a classic in Finnish

5. Väinö Linna (1920–92) served as a non-commissioned officer in a machine-gun company during the Continuation War, and the first version of his manuscript was entitled simply The War Novel. His publisher revised the manuscript and suggested a new title, but it was published as The War Novel in 2000. Between 1954 and 2014 The Unknown Soldier sold more than 750,000 copies and The War Novel more than 70,000 copies in Finland.


8. Ibid., 188.


The work has gone through 60 editions, selling almost 800,000 copies. As early as 1955, the novel’s story was turned into a film, directed by Edvin Laine. Yrjö Varpio has argued that the actors in that film gave faces and voices to the novel’s characters. The scenes chosen for the first screen version became important in the Finns’ collective memory. The novel together with the film marked a turning point in Finnish cultural memory of the war. In Ville Kivimäki’s opinion, in the novel and the film, ‘many earlier taboos were openly discussed and front-line soldiers were given human faces instead of idealized images, which seemed to be much more realistic and acceptable to the soldiers themselves’. The film is regularly televised on Finland’s Independence Day (6 December). Each year it is watched by almost a million Finns – nearly 20% of the population. In light of its popularity, the novel’s title, The Unknown Soldier, is paradoxical: the main characters are actually the best-known soldiers in Finland.

The first theatre production based on the novel took place in 1961, 20 years after the beginning of the Continuation War, and over the years there have been 12 different productions of various adaptations of The Unknown Soldier in professional theatres around the country. Although there is no standard play script, most of the stage adaptations include the key scenes from the 1955 film. Curiously, many of the theatre productions took place in the 1960s and 1970s, when the Second World War was not a popular topic in public discourse and war veterans were trying to resume life in a society that was not ready to discuss its collective trauma. Perhaps theatre seemed a safe place for such memories; certainly the number of productions indicates that there was a need for remembrance. A production at the Pyynikki Summer Theatre, directed by Edvin Laine (responsible for the 1955 film), proved especially popular. It opened in 1961 and played 372 performances during nine consecutive summers.

In November 2007, Smeds’s production of The Unknown Soldier premiered at the Finnish National Theatre in Helsinki. The three-and-a-half-hour performance was organized around key scenes from Linna’s novel, and included 13 male actors and one female actor. A camera crew onstage filmed the whole performance, largely using a hand-held video camera. This distinguished the adaptation technologically; meanwhile, the stage production was itself characterized by an interaction of digital technology and live performance. A wide onstage screen was used to stream both online and recorded video material. The streamed images were also used as props for the scenes. During the performance, the actors moved around the entire auditorium. Music, recorded or played by the actors, was also highly relevant in this interpretation.

The camera and video were not only dramaturgical choices; they also made reference to two film versions of The Unknown Soldier (Edvin Laine’s from 1955 and another film directed by Rauni Mollberg in 1985), and they strengthened the interaction between the audience members and the stage production. Smeds immediately established his interpretation’s investment in popular culture by marching actors in military uniform from the back of auditorium through the theatre to the rhythm of the American rap artist Eminem’s White America, thereby inviting the audience to a collective re-evaluation of questions related to the war and discourses of nationalism. The lyrics sounded like welcoming words: ‘We love you! How many people are proud to be citizens of this beautiful country of ours!’

In the present article we connect collective cultural memory with theatre by using Marvin Carlson’s concept of postmodern recycling. According to Carlson, postmodernism sparked a new interest in recycling material in theatrical productions. The particular use

11. Pilvi Torsti, Suomalaiset ja historia (Tampere: Gaudeamus, 2012), pp. 108, 136–8. In her research Pilvi Torsti has investigated awareness of Finnish history in Finland. Her research reveals that, in the twenty-first century, The Unknown Soldier was rated as the history book that has most profoundly impressed Finnish citizens. There was also a general unanimity that The Unknown Soldier provides a persuasive description of the Continuation War in Finland.

12. Yrjö Varpio, Väinö Linnan elämä (Helsinki: WSOY, 2006), 374, 378. The novel was filmed for the second time in 1985, but this version has not achieved the popularity or acclaim of the 1955 feature.

13. See, for example, Tiina Kinnunen and Markku Joksipää, ‘Shifting Images of “our wars”: Finnish Memory Culture of World War II’, in Finland in World War II History, Memory, Interpretations, ed. by Tiina Kinnunen and Ville Kivimäki (Boston/Leiden: Brill NV, 2012), 435–82 (444).


15. The total population of Finland is approximately 5.47 million.


to which theatrical recycling is put varies not only from culture to culture, but also from production to production. Carlson emphasizes the close relationship of theatre and memory through the retelling of stories; the re-enactment of events has always been an important element of theatre, whatever the time or the place. He connects these essential theatre elements with particular production dynamics. What is important is the stories that are told, the people who are telling them and where the tales are told.

The Finnish National Theatre can be described as a monument that, using the definition provided by Joanne Tompkins, combines memory, power, and identity. Tompkins writes that a monument is a symbolic place, full of history, even when it is not accepted unanimously or when its function changes over time. Smeds has said that this theatre had a crucial role in his decision to direct The Unknown Soldier. It was the first time an adaptation of the novel was produced in Finland’s National Theatre and also the first time Smeds had worked there. Strategically, it was important to Smeds to produce The Unknown Soldier, which already played a central role in the nation’s collective memory. The production itself was a monument as well a national tribute in which two culturally important icons of Finnish culture – the National Theatre and the novel by Väinö Linna – intersected for the very first time. To acknowledge the importance of this intersection, the Finnish National Theatre announced that the production, first presented in autumn 2007, would celebrate 90 years of Finnish independence. Smeds himself claimed that the production was a celebration of the independence of his own generation.

Julie Sanders points out that many artworks openly declare themselves ‘as an interpretation or re-reading of a canonical precursor’. In her opinion, sometimes this involves a director’s personal vision and a cultural relocation or other kind of updating. Smeds’s production highlighted the role of the adapter as interpreter: a director using a novel as a template for his own dramatization.

In the programme Smeds was identified as co-author of the text. Likewise, von Bagh and Moila stressed their position as participants in a dialogue by calling their production The Unknown Soldier: A Dialogue with Linna’s Novel.

Whereas Smeds emphasized Linna’s war story on a macro level, namely Finnish history and society, the interpretation by von Bagh and Moila examined the war effects on the micro (or personal) level. Their radio play was commissioned by a dramaturge who was head of drama productions at Yle, the Finnish Broadcasting Company. The Unknown Soldier: A Dialogue with Linna’s Novel celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of the novel and the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Continuation War. Von Bagh and Moila referred explicitly to their play as a commentary on the original text. The radio play was divided into six hour-long episodes, entitled: 1) Trial by Fire; 2) Fear and Fury; 3) Heroism; 4) Inside Greater Finland; 5) The End of Politics; 6) Depression.

Each episode focused on two or three characters in the novel. Von Bagh and Moila included documentary material and authentic interviews with soldiers who had fought at the front, and the authors emphasized the soldiers’ emotional, mental, and physical reactions by adding their own comments on the war from a markedly twenty-first-century perspective. This interpretation challenged the role of these well-known characters as role models and ventured deeper into their personal motives. At the same time, the experience of listening to a radio play was highly individualized in many ways. The listener could choose the time and place to listen (the radio play was downloaded onto the internet site of the Finnish Broadcasting Company and could be listened to free of charge). The experience of listening was as personal as the themes dealt with in the play’s story and its recognizable characters.

As early as in 1992 Pierre Nora observed that,

> Our memory is intensely retinal, powerfully televisual. The much-touted ‘return of the narrative’ in recent historical writing has to be linked to the ubiquity of visual images and film in contemporary culture – even if this new narrative is very different from traditional narrative, which was episodic and self-contained.

We consider visual images to be important for collective memory. This was relevant not only to

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20. Ibid., 3.
23. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
Smeds’s production, but also to the radio play. In
the stage play well-known actors gave physical
embodiment to the novel’s characters, while the
radio play capitalized on questioning the visual
images in the audience’s collective memory
imprinted by the two films made of the novel. For
example, in the radio play the narrator commented
on how short and ugly the soldier Lehto looks, not
at all tall and handsome like the actor Åke Lindman,
who was cast as Lehto in the 1955 film version.

Both adaptations highlighted the use of violence –
something that had been evaded by previous adapta-
tions. The violence was not only directed towards the
enemy, but also towards civilians and Finnish troops.
Not only the Continuation War, but all wars, both
recent and past, were condemned through vivid
depictions of the madness of violence. For example,
in Smed’s production, a projection of a world map
showed video-game-like bombs exploding in differ-
ent parts of the world. Furthermore, the use of doc-
umentary material from the Iraq War in 2003 alluded
to a broader culture of war. At the level of content,
this staging considered the Second World War and its
effects from the point of view of the Finnish nation
and its collective memory. His interpretation was at
the forefront of reinterpreting Finland’s Second
World War history by focusing the discussion of the
War on areas that were subsequently picked up on by
Finnish historians. For example, an anthology called
Ruma sota talvi- ja jatkosodan vaiettu historia –
‘Ugly War: The Silenced History of the Winter War
and the Continuation War’ – compiled by a younger
generation of historians, was published in 2008.

This anthology verbalized for the first time some of
the themes that had previously been unmentionable
in Finland: war crimes, conscientious objection,
desertion, and soldiers’ misuse of alcohol and drugs.
Some of these themes had been portrayed on stage in
Kristian Smeds’s Unknown Soldier a year earlier.

Representations of Memory in a
National Context

In Pierre Nora’s view, memory is always a phenom-
enon of the present and fastens upon sites, whereas
history is a representation of the past and fastens upon
events.29 A theatre combines the two: it is a place
where both memory and history are joined. The thea-
tre as a building is a site, while as a cultural institution
a theatre produces events. The Finnish National
Theatre has indeed witnessed significant events in
the country’s history.30 It has also participated in
these events, as in 1918, when celebrations of the
country’s recently declared independence were held
at the theatre.31 The Finnish National Theatre is an
exceptionally important theatre site in Finland. Its
main stage can be seen, we argue, as a monument to
Finnish culture. It is both a lieu d’histoire and a lieu de
mémoire in Nora’s definition. Nora argues that, in
order for a site, place, or cause to become a lieu de
mémoire, there needs to be the intention to remem-
ber; otherwise, the site would be a lieu d’histoire.32 In
the production of The Unknown Soldier, there was the
intention to remember, and the production became a
lieu de mémoire, one of the works of history that
reshape memory in a fundamental way.

Aside from the premiere, there was another extra-
ordinary performance of Smed’s work: on 5
February 2008, all members of the Finnish
Parliament were invited to attend The Unknown
Soldier. It is a tradition in Finland for parliamentar-
ians (MPs) to attend an opera performance together
on the evening Parliament opens. This time Speaker
Sauli Niinistö chose to have the MPs see The
Unknown Soldier at the Finnish National Theatre.33
As representatives of their constituents, the MPs also
represent the nation whose memory culture of the
Continuation War was challenged by the production.
MPs were interviewed by the press, and some
expressed their opinions publicly. The question of
whether to attend became national news when
Finnish newspapers reported who had chosen not
to attend Smed’s The Unknown Soldier.34

Non-attendance could be interpreted as a protest
against the new adaptation. Some MPs, like the
prime minister at the time, Matti Vanhanen, who
had publicly criticized the production without having
seen it, were not present. At the opening of
Parliament, Vanhanen was abroad. In a statement
the prime minister declared that, while artists can do

30. The Finnish National Theatre was founded in 1872 as the
Finnish Theatre; in 1902, the name was changed to the
Finnish National Theatre, 15 years before Finland declared its
independence from Russia.
31. The minutes of the board meeting of the Finnish National
Theatre, 25 January 1918, Archive of the Finnish National
Theatre.
32. Nora, Realms of Memory, p. 17.
33. In 2012 Sauli Niinistö was elected president of Finland.
34. See, for example, Tuula Nieminen, ‘Minähän ammun takaisin’, Ilta-lehti, 6 February 2008; Tommi Hannula, ‘Sehän
oliinkin loistava’, Ilta-Sanomat, 6 February 2008; Maarit Kesti, ‘Kerola ja Valpas jättävät Tuntemattoman väliin’, Raahen
whatever they want, he himself did not have to show any cultural spirit and attend this kind of performance. This atypical case shows how *The Unknown Soldier* could not escape being interpreted through national issues. Finland’s leaders were expected to see the performance and articulate their response to it. And yet, according to Hana Worthen, his production was not only about Finland. In her words, the performance ‘celebrates unsettling rifts in the nation’s identity, as the ethical insularity of the Finnish Second World War imagery gives way to the more dispersed imagery of contemporary globalization and its virulent “remote control” wars’. The Finnish National Theatre’s history at the intersection of various political events was further taken into account in Smeds’s production. The director created a scene during which Second Lieutenant Koskela (played by Timo Tuominen) addresses the audience in a monologue. Koskela is one of the novel’s most beloved characters, and his family history is recounted in Väinö Linna’s trilogy *Under the North Star* (1959, 1960 and 1962). In the scene, Koskela tries to get the audience to sing ‘his family song’, *The Red Guards’ March* (*Punakaartin marssi*), one of the best-known working-class marches of the Finnish Civil War, in which the Whites defeated the Reds in 1918. When the character Rokka (Henry Hanikka) calls him out for singing a rebellious song, Koskela responds that he is singing a love song. It was assumed that the audience would know the family history of the character, including the fact that two of Koskela’s uncles were executed for being Red soldiers.

In this particular scene, the history of the physical space of performance, namely the stage and the main auditorium of the Finnish National Theatre, intersected with the mise en scène of Smeds’s production. During the Finnish Civil War in 1918, the Reds held meetings in the theatre building, although without the permission of the board. It is very likely that the song, *The Red Guards’ March*, which Koskela wants the audience to sing, was performed in that very place, almost 90 years earlier. Furthermore, immediately after the Civil War, the Finnish National Theatre organized a number of events for White soldiers. The theatre was one of the cultural institutions connected with White (bourgeois) hegemony in Finland during the 1920s and 1930s. This scene played on an assumption that contemporary audiences attending this theatre would not know the lyrics of *The Red Guards’ March* nor would they want to sing it, given that the Reds lost the Civil War to the Whites. While Koskela was talking about his own family history, the production was ‘staging’ a civil war that had arguably generated some of the strongest emotional memories of recent Finnish history, memories that were suppressed for several decades. As part of a theatre performance, these memories are shared collectively in a space that had importance for both sides during the Civil War.

**Varieties of Masculinity**

In the sections that follow we give two examples of how these adaptations of Väinö Linna’s novel changed Finnish memory culture. We first want to address how it challenged particular ideas of masculinity associated with a particular model of heroism. We use the term ‘masculinity’ from the point of view of a hegemonic masculinity, which implicitly defines what is ‘normal’ for men in Finnish culture. Masculinity operates both on an external level, in terms of social roles and relations, and on an internal one, in terms of subjectivity, feelings, and definitions of self. The concept is culturally developed and sustained. As each historical era has its own version of masculinity, an exploration of these two productions offers an opportunity to show how prototypes of masculinity have changed (in Finland) since the Second World War. Both productions of *The Unknown Soldier* challenged long-held ideas concerning the characters’ heroism. They also portrayed the sexual violence perpetrated by Finnish soldiers, incorporating it into the collective narrative of war.

In Linna’s novel the image of the brave soldier was narrowly defined. Soldiers were denied any feelings that could be construed as feminine, such as crying or

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37. The events are mentioned in the annual reports of the Finnish National Theatre 1917–19: Archive of the Finnish National Theatre.
38. ‘White and bourgeois’ refers to the victors in the Civil War of 1918.
39. In contemporary research the study of masculinity has been undertaken by sociologists and gender theorists as a subfield of ‘men’s studies’. The term ‘masculinity’ is not unproblematic: historically changing, redefined, and renegotiated, its meanings are closely tied in with those of other kinds of power relations, such as those of class and nationality. See, for example, Michael Mangan, *Staging Masculinities: History, Gender, Performance* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 5.
40. Ibid., 13.
being terrified. In both Smeds’s and von Bagh and Moila’s interpretations these feelings were made manifest. Both productions focused on the character Riiota: unable to hide his fear or fulfill his duties, he whines and needs help from other soldiers.

In Smeds’s stage production, Riiota (Heikki Pitkänen) is the first character to enter onstage. He suffers from psychosis as a result of the war (see Image 1). In Smeds’s version, Riiota is not killed in battle as in the novel, but is executed for being a deserter. Smeds’s decision shows that previous representations of the war have not been permitted to challenge the masculinity of a war hero. In 2007 the mental effects of war on Finnish soldiers was a topic that was still not publicly discussed. It can be argued that Smeds’s production was the very first time these issues were aired openly.

In Finnish society questions of war psychosis began to be discussed by historians only in 2013 when Ville Kivimäki’s Battled Nerves: Finnish Soldiers’ War Experience, Trauma and Military Psychiatry, 1941–1944 was published. Seven years after Smeds’s production, von Bagh and Moila used Kivimäki’s research as a basis for their interpretation, and even invited Kivimäki to talk to the actors. In their radio play, Moila added a scene in which Riiota is writing a letter to his mother. Riiota describes how he is suffering from symptoms of psychosis relating to his war experiences. At the end of the scene the narrator laconically mentions that, as was habitually the case, Riiota’s letter did not get past the war censors.

Kivimäki has also made the point that mothers are not discussed in Linna’s novel. This symbolic connection with mothers reveals something of the emotional state of the war years. The soldiers were so young that, for most of them, their mother was their closest loved one. In this light, making Riiota’s relationship to his mother visible made the story even more revealing. The characters in the novel meet the legal requirements of masculinity as men who have come of age, even if they were emotionally just boys, hardly old enough to leave their mothers.

Image 1 The direction by Smeds highlighted the mental effects of war. Riiota (Heikki Pitkänen) was executed for cowardice under Smeds’s direction, unlike his fate in Linna’s original novel. Photograph courtesy of Antti Ahonen.

41. We use the term war psychosis because this was used for all mental disorders during the Continuation War in Finland. In contemporary terms the diagnosis would be post-traumatic stress disorder. This term has been an attempt to create a universal, objective psychiatric description of the psychological consequences of traumatic stress, and thus to medically standardize the diagnosis and treatment of traumatized patients. See Ville Kivimäki, ‘Sotamies Riiotaan poikauhri: Sota suomalaisen mieheyden myyttisenä lähteena’, in Nälkämaiden sukupuoli: Miehedyden pitkä historia, ed. by Pirjo Markkola, Ann-Catrin Östman and Marko Lamberg (Vantaa: Vastapaino, Osuuskunta Vastapaino, 2014), 60.


Kivimäki has further noted that Riitaoja’s character is needed in the story to emphasize the bravery of others. In the radio play Riitaoja was read by Tommi Eronen, who also read the part of Lehto, one of the bravest soldiers. Lehto is in constant conflict with Riitaoja in the novel because he cannot stand how Riitaoja shows his weakness. The casting decision highlights the opposition of the characters. In Eronen’s view, Riitaoja and Lehto represent two different approaches to performing fear.

The radio play acknowledged the characters’ humanity and the range of their emotions in a way that challenged interpreting them as prototypes.

The other way to change the way that the war’s soldiers are remembered involves emphasizing their youth. In the earlier film adaptations, the actors had been closer to middle-age rather than teenagers, a situation that did not reflect the average age of the conscripts. In Smeds’s version one of the youngest soldiers, Hauhia (Heikki Pitkänen), was portrayed as a TV chat-show host, ‘Hauhia live@front’. Hauhia was largely seen as a talking head onscreen, creating humour by undertaking amusing imitations of twenty-first-century teens’ dialogue and spoofing the content of Linna’s novel by sampling music and joking.

However, Hauhia is a tragic character. He is killed almost immediately after arriving at the front line; it was his first watch and he was not careful enough. Young and innocent, Hauhia cannot imagine that he will die. He peeks out from his watch to view the enemy’s front line and a sniper shoots him.

There are similar contemporary effects in von Bagh and Moila’s adaptation of the novel. The war action in one scene was presented as a ‘popular reality television show, Syväri Survivors’. Von Bagh and Moila connected the characters with contemporary action movie heroes by using the slogan ‘Rokka – Cold Revenge on a radio near you in 2014’ to market their radio play. In addition to providing a level of humour, these references created identifiable analogies, which helped audiences to perceive the characters as if they might be soldiers of the Continuation War.

At the beginning of Smeds’s adaptation, Soviet soldiers were represented by washing machines.

Image 2 The Unknown Soldier is always interpreted in a national context, and it is often connected with Finland’s celebration of independence. Photograph courtesy of Antti Ahonen.

44. Ibid., 256.
46. Syväri Survivors refers to Survivor, a reality game show produced in many countries throughout the world. In the show, contestants are isolated in the wilderness and compete for cash.
47. The washing machines could be seen as a reference to ice hockey, as the Soviet national team’s nickname was the Big Red Machine (Punakone). During the scenes depicting war violence, the accompanying music was a Finnish ice hockey anthem, ‘Wonderful Lions, Wonderful’ (Ihanaa leijonat, Ihanaa), connected especially with the World Championship, which Finland won in 1995 for the first time. Furthermore, as in the army and in sports also, in The Unknown Soldier characters are referred mostly by their surnames (Image 2).
Battle scenes were staged with the actors hammering on the machines with sledge hammers. Blow by blow, the Finnish soldiers smashed the machines (Image 3). The production met with criticism in certain quarters for presenting human beings as machines. In addition to changing the image of Finnish troops, there was also a clear difference between the novel and the film in how the enemy was first dehumanized, then humanized. At a later point in the performance, the enemy was not only humanized, but even shown to be the Finns themselves, as the camera was turned on the audience, turning them into the enemy.

Whereas the 1955 film version of Linna’s novel did not show the faces of Soviet soldiers and Linna himself had consciously avoided dealing with the enemy’s experiences, Smeds’s production deliberately focused on the faces of audience members. The scene gave the enemy faces and showed them as victims. Most of the targeted spectators were embarrassed and reacted by covering their faces when they saw the camera filming them. In one performance, however, a teenage boy, seeing himself onscreen, reacted quickly by playing the role of a dying Soviet soldier. As a spectator, he participated in the performance, borrowing the dramaturgy of his behaviour from video games.

The portrayal of masculinity in the performances challenged Finns’ collective memory of Linna’s characters. The performances also created new collective memories by including scenes that portrayed sexual violence. In the novel such things were not explicitly described, but these twenty-first century versions brought to light sexual violence committed by Finnish soldiers against civilians during the war. Temporal distance made this possible, as sexual violence during wartime had been a taboo in the 1950s when the novel was first published. In this way the adaptations created new memories (and histories) of the Second World War for Finns.

There is an example of this in a scene in Smeds’s production that could be interpreted as group rape. The soldiers have found a set of matryoshka (Russian wooden nesting dolls of decreasing size placed inside one another) in a washing machine. Nestled in a woollen sock, the matryoshka dolls were taken apart, one by one. The soldiers became increasingly excited as they passed the dolls around. They cradled the dolls, licked them and put them in their mouths. This action was beamed to the audience through facial close-ups visible on a screen.

48. The performance of The Unknown Soldier on 30 November 2009. Both of the present authors witnessed this particular performance.

49. This issue is highly topical; as recently as June 2014, a global summit to end sexual violence in conflicts was held in London.
above the actors onstage as they stood shoulder to shoulder in a tight circle. The action was interrupted when the war skirmishes resumed.

When the soldiers left the stage, the production’s only woman actor remained, singing in Russian a version of the song ‘Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down),’ known from the Nancy Sinatra cover (1966) of Cher’s hit from the same year. ‘Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)’ is now best known through its use in Quentin Tarantino’s ‘Kill Bill’ films (2003, 2004). The use of music in this scene is also an example of the postmodern recycling referred to earlier in this article. At the same time black-and-white photographs of war victims – half-naked dead women two soldiers dragging a frozen body, the carcass of a horse lying in a ditch – were projected onto the big screen onstage. According to Pirkko Koski, the images shown had been forbidden for several decades after the war. Showing the brutal consequences of violence in photographs – the past superimposed on the present – expanded the fictional narrative to real events and people, and made it impossible to deny the violence.

The radio play ‘The Unknown Soldier: A Dialogue with Linna’s Novel’ also addressed the taboo of sexual violence. Von Bagh and Moila took up the question that Smeds’s production had brought to the stage seven years earlier and explored it further. A similar strategy of forcing the audience to face the brutal consequences of war was also part of their approach. An important decision was made to add more female voices to what had been a largely male story. A soldier called Rahikainen procures women as sexual partners for his friends during their stay in Petroskoi. In the novel, Rahikainen’s activities are described in a way that makes what he is doing seem harmless and funny. In the radio play, however, the female narrator accuses Rahikainen of human trafficking. The issue of women selling sex during the war was brought into the discussion through a term (‘human trafficking’), which had not previously been connected with ‘The Unknown Soldier.’ These themes opened a whole new set of questions about the events of the war that had not been voiced before.

Conclusions: Mechanisms and Meanings of Memory

One way to understand the position of ‘The Unknown Soldier’ in Finnish culture is through Arthur Koestler’s term ‘matrix’, a word used to describe cognitive structures, mental habits, and abilities that interlock to a certain extent when an individual is solving problems. The ‘Unknown Soldier’ can be seen as a cultural matrix in Finland, where it has been widely believed that there is only a limited number of appropriate ways to adapt Väinö Linna’s canonic work. In other words, any adaptation should be undertaken with respect for the original text. Contrary to these expectations, Smeds employed an associative approach to interpreting an iconic novel and incorporated unfamiliar elements into this war classic, such as sexual violence and the psychological effects the war had on soldiers. This created a chaos of signs and significations that opened the work to entirely new interpretations. This might also explain why Smeds’s production was seen as radical and, according to some, even a ‘theatre revolution’.

In our opinion, this was one of the reasons why the radio play did not provoke such radical public discourse. Smeds’s interpretation had already broken the taboos; the radio play’s effect was therefore judged to be more muted. In any case, as our examination has shown, the radio play introduced words not previously used to describe the consequences of war: human trafficking, sexual violence, and mental health. These themes were embodied onstage but it was left to the audience to pick up on the new emphases in this familiar material. Because the radio play verbalized these aspects, they could no longer be ignored.

Using evolution as an analogy and adaptations as transgenerational phenomena, Linda Hutcheon compares stories retold in different ways using new material and in new cultural environments to genes. Like genes, stories adapt to new environments through mutation. Considered in this light, ‘The Unknown Soldier’ at the Finnish National Theatre and ‘The Unknown Soldier: A Dialogue with Linna’s Novel,’ the radio play, can be considered part of the evolution of a well-known story. In adapting the novel, Smeds and von Bagh and Moila created productions by

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means of collage-like structures, binding themes and core ideas in the original to contemporary elements. Producing new adaptations of canonic texts is an important way to re-evaluate their significance in the collective memory. In Hutcheon’s words, the fittest do more than survive: they flourish. The two adaptations of The Unknown Soldier dealt with in this article encouraged a new critical evaluation of the novel and tempted younger spectators to evaluate the national narrative for themselves.

Smeds’s theatre production ran for 120 performances over more than two years, playing to 75,000 audiences in largely sold-out performances. The radio play was aired on Finland’s two main radio channels, Yle Radio 1 and Yle Radio Suomi, in September and October of 2014. The productions challenged audiences to think about their own family histories vis-à-vis the wars. Through The Unknown Soldier, the productions managed to challenge the public imagery related to the Second World War in the audience’s collective memory, including the unquestioned heroism of Finnish soldiers. These new representations of The Unknown Soldier have enlarged the scope of the Finns’ collective memory, enabling more detailed and fragmented approaches to the nation’s past.

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55. Ibid.
56. The radio play was broadcast on Sundays and Mondays on Yle Radio 1, the main radio channel of the Finnish Broadcasting Company, with approximately 56,000 and 70,000 listeners respectively. It was broadcast on Thursdays on Radio Suomi, reaching approximately 163,000 listeners. KRT Online/Finnpanel Oy, Yle OR. It could also be listened to online; there were approximately 3,300 listeners online per episode. DAX/com Score, Yle OR.

57. See, for example Tiina Kinnunen and Markku Jokisipilä, ‘Shifting Images of “our wars”’, 476.