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The next issue will feature:
- Conversation – how interpretation can create seeds for a conversation, discussion and/or debate among visitors.

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Provoke

Lapland’s dark heritage

Suzi Thomas looks at how the idea of ‘dark’ heritage has been useful in understanding the processes at play in Finland in relation to the legacy of the Second World War.

In this short article, I start with a brief overview of the local history of the area that we have studied, and then describe some of the different examples of ‘dark heritage’ engagement that we have encountered. What they mean for future treatment of the wartime material heritage in Finnish Lapland remains to be seen.

Finnish wartime history

Since 2014, researchers from the Universities of Helsinki and Oulu in Finland have been investigating the different ways that locals and tourists alike come to terms with the material legacy of the Second World War in Finnish Lapland. Finland’s wartime history has many controversial facets, not least the country’s co-belligerency with Nazi Germany. The mass destruction of much of Lapland’s settlements and infrastructure during the 1944-45 Lapland War remained a traumatic scar in the north of the country for many decades. The research project, titled ‘Lapland’s Dark Heritage’ and funded by the Academy of Finland (a major national research...

The city of Rovaniemi burns during the Lapland War.
funding body), has aimed to understand how different people value, perceive and make meaning from the material culture related to this period. Its uses include traditional museum display and other touristic or interpretational methods, through to very private practices such as keeping objects as family mementos or trading and exchanging them between private collectors and treasure hunters.

**Difficult histories**

The topic of difficult histories seems to be hot in cultural heritage debates at present. From international conferences addressing presentation of controversial and painful subjects such as the ICOM conference in Helsingborg, Sweden, in Autumn 2017, through to news debates in the USA over how to handle commemoration of Confederacy historical figures, the topic has gone hand in hand with discussions about the social responsibility of heritage interpretation to represent different histories and experiences. Which histories are celebrated and which are silenced seems more relevant than ever.

Finland, like so many places, did not escape involvement in the Second World War. Two wars with the Soviet Union – the 1939-40 Winter War and the 1941-44 so-called Continuation War – demonstrated the small republic’s vulnerability to external attack. The loss of territory including Petsamo, parts of Salla and Kuusamo, and Karelia (a region which included Finland’s second city, Viipuri – now Vyborg in the Russian Federation) meant economic loss but also displacement of many citizens who were evacuated to what remained of Finland. As a response to the Soviet threat, Finland entered into a co-belligerency with Germany (they were never official allies, and the Finnish authorities were keen to keep their war effort a separate issue from that of the Germans). As part of this agreement more than 200,000 German troops, in addition to Organization Todt¹, labourers and prisoners of war, were posted in Finland, and especially in the Lapland region.

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¹Organization Todt: A construction company founded by the Nazi regime, responsible for many of the structures and facilities built during World War II. They were widely seen as forced labor under extreme conditions, predominantly involving prisoners of war and forced laborers from various countries.
Testing relationships

Relationships seem to have been relatively harmonious, with local recollections of friendly encounters between Finns, the indigenous Sámi, and the foreign visitors. However, this balance was not to last, and following a truce with the Soviet Union, Finland had to expel its former brothers in arms from its borders. German troops retreated mostly into occupied Norway, but as they departed Finland they employed ‘scorched earth’ tactics, destroying much of Lapland’s towns, settlements, rail networks, bridges and so forth. Although actual casualty numbers were relatively low, the material destruction was high.

Researchers have already studied the impact this material loss has had on sense of place and cultural memory. Combined with the effects of short-notice evacuation and in particular, the impact of the war on the Sámi way of life (such as the Skolt Sámi who permanently lost their homelands in Petsamo), the topic of Lapland’s war experience has remained a difficult one for official heritage authorities to address. There have also been feelings in the north that their story has been overlooked in favour of the more politically dominant southern regions. Another particularly terrible, and, until recently, hidden aspect of the Finnish Laplanders’ experience of the Second World War was the actions of Soviet partisans, who roamed the territory targeting villages and other small settlements. They executed indiscriminately – the elderly and children were not spared – with the aim of distracting the Finnish and German armies, but their actions were not discussed for many years, for fear of Finland upsetting the awkward peace with the Soviet Union during the Cold War years.

We have met a remarkable array of people, from avid collectors of the so-called ‘war junk’ left over in the forests, to Sámi elders who still remember vividly being evacuated as children from their homes ahead of the burning of Lapland.

Interpreting the difficult heritage

Our research team consists of archaeologists, a museologist and an ethnologist. Several students have also found useful material through collaborating with our research group and have contributed invaluable discussions and ideas. In our own interdisciplinary way, we have been exploring the responses to this ‘dark’ heritage in Finland’s far north. This has included interviewing different people (local residents, visitors, people with family connections to the area, descendants of soldiers), and conducting archaeological surveys and public archaeology excavations with volunteers. We have met a remarkable array of people, from avid collectors of the so-called ‘war junk’ left over in the forests, to Sámi elders who still remember vividly being evacuated as children from their homes ahead of the burning of Lapland.

Unofficial monuments

In addition, we have noted with interest the different ways that the heritage has been used (or ignored) in interpretation and tourism strategies locally. We have seen remnants such as tanks and parts of Second World War aircraft “mounted” as features at points of interest, such as at the Sovinioara scenic view, for visitors to observe when they arrive at the car park, ahead of taking a short walk to a breathtaking view over Lake Inari. These objects often come with little further explanation, but seem to be seen as interesting and aesthetically eye-catching curiosities in their own right. A similar instance of what might be termed ‘unofficial monuments’ is also encountered at a camping site in the village of Inari, where one finds the engine of a crashed aeroplane, apparently dredged from Lake Inari, exhibited next to the campsite’s entrance from the main road. There is very little contextual information offered, or history provided of the aircraft or the war that brought it to Lapland, but its presence at the campsite points to its perceived usefulness as a place marker and symbol of the local history of the area.

Museum representations

In what might be considered more ‘official’ forms of heritage interpretation, such as the region’s museums, we have found patchy coverage, especially of the Lapland War itself. Given the impact that the war and associated evacuations had on Sámi life, it is perhaps surprising that so little of this period is represented in the Finnish Sámi Museum – Siida, in the centre of Inari. There is some incidental mention of the war among the narratives on display, including a passing mention that, as a result of the war, the Skolt Sámi had to move from their traditional homelands in Petsamo. However, this and other difficult aspects of Sámi history (such as the widespread practice of sending Sámi children to boarding schools to assimilate them into the majority Finnish language and culture), seem understated in favour of presenting more positive and neutral
themes such as the Sámi relationship to nature, and traditional handicrafts. (It is, however, important to note that the permanent exhibitions in Siida are due to be renewed in the coming years.) Other small museums in the area, such as the Gold Prospector Museum in the village of Tankavaara, also relegate the war to a passive mention within its texts. This is despite the impact that war had also on gold prospecting activity in the region, and the museum’s location close to a key battle site. The Provincial Museum of Lapland, in Rovaniemi, does, however, have in its permanent exhibition several references to the Second World War in general, and to the Lapland War itself. This includes two striking scale models of the city – showing how it looked before the Lapland War, and then the burnt and mostly destroyed remains after the war, which was particularly devastating for Rovaniemi. In Salla, close to the Russian border (‘Old’ Salla now in fact lies abandoned across the border), there is the Salla Museum of War and Reconstruction. This museum is unique in its focus on the impact of the Second World War in Finnish Lapland.

Looking ahead

Our project has given us the opportunity to spend time in Lapland, and to interview many actors, both private individuals and heritage professionals. The project seems to have sparked debate regionally and nationally about whether to draw more attention to the wartime heritage in Finnish Lapland as a means of enhancing tourism – an intriguing contrast to Lapland’s ‘typical’ imagery of wilderness tourism, the Northern Lights and family visits to meet Santa Claus. At the same time, it is clear that certain aspects of the wartime experience, such as the plight of prisoners of war north of the Arctic Circle or the terror of the partisan attacks, are still to be unpicked further, in both the private and the public spheres. Although our project is coming to the end of its first round of funding, we are all of us determined to continue to research aspects of Lapland’s dark heritage, and to see how the debates around how best to commemorate (or not) this chapter in Finland’s history develops.

Suzie Thomas, museologist, is Professor of Cultural Heritage Studies at the University of Helsinki, Finland.

Reference:
1. Organisation Todt was a civil and military group in the Third Reich, named after its founder Fritz Todt, which was notorious for using forced labour.