

Modern conflict archaeologies and dark heritages

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Abstract

In this article we reflect upon the development of conflict archaeology, especially in Finland, as well as the even more recent emergence of dark heritage as a field of academic enquiry. We trace how research at the University of Helsinki has influenced these fields both nationally and internationally, and draw parallels with current events including populism and (ultra) nationalist identities. Within the context of Finland, research on past conflicts especially of the Twentieth Century and especially within the Indigenous North, offer opportunity also to shine a light on important and often neglected debates on and experiences of Finnish coloniality. Since the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, debates and popular media in Finland has also started to draw parallels with the Finnish experience of Soviet warfare in the Second World War, showing that the past, especially that involving conflict and trauma, is never too far away from contemporary life.

Keywords: Conflict Archaeology, Dark Heritage, University of Helsinki; Lapland's Dark Heritage, Colonialism, Identity

The archaeological study of modern, 20th–21st Century conflicts has developed globally relatively recently as its own specialised field of study (e.g., Schofield 2009; Myers & Moshenska 2011; Saunders 2012; Theune 2018). This has taken place in tandem with a wider interest in the darker shades of heritage. These have moved the heritage work beyond the traditional, typically monument and national narrative-centred definitions. Those have often neglected and even silenced for example local, marginalized, or indigenous voices and histories (e.g., McAtackney 2014; Carr & Corbishley 2015; Thomas *et al.* 2019).

'Dark heritage' has been gaining popularity in recent years as a broader umbrella definition that can cover a multitude of approaches and types of heritage sites. The term originates from the longer used 'dark tourism' (Stone 2006) which refers specifically to touristic consumption of particular places. However, both of these fields deal essentially with themes, sites and places related in various ways to death, suffering and disasters (Thomas *et al.* 2019). Archaeology and

material culture approach can sometimes offer unexpected and surprising perspectives to these issues which differ from the images attained only through documents and oral histories (e.g., Herva & Seitsonen 2020; Seitsonen & Matila 2022; Seitsonen *et al.* 2021).

Beginnings in Finland: Lapland's Dark Heritage

In Finland, the archaeology of modern conflicts developed initially in slow steps, from humble beginnings since the mid-1990s. These were at first often frowned upon by other archaeologists (Kauppi 1994; 2002; Takala 1998; Seitsonen & Kunnas 2009; Seitsonen 2018a). However, in recent years especially dark heritage studies have become increasingly popular and have gained scientific and public attention both nationally and internationally (e.g., Herva 2014; Thomas *et al.* 2016; 2019). This development has been largely driven and influenced by the research carried out by archaeologists from the

University of Helsinki (see Seitsonen & Herva 2011; Seitsonen 2021a).

Especially the *Lapland's Dark Heritage: Material heritage of German WWII military presence in Finnish Lapland* project funded by the Academy of Finland in 2015–2018 (PI Vesa-Pekka Herva), and its follow-ups have been important in this respect (<https://blogs.helsinki.fi/lapland-dark-heritage/>) (Figure 1; Herva 2014; Thomas *et al.* 2016; Thomas & Koskinen-Koivisto 2017; Seitsonen & Moshenska 2021). This project assessed the difficult and long neglected legacy of the Nazi German presence in Northern Finland, first as allies in 1940–1944 and then as enemies in 1944–1945. A large part of this research took place in Sápmi, the transnational homeland of the Sámi people. Therefore, the spatial and cultural context where these Second World War localities are found is inherently (post-)colonial, bringing further tones to the issues surrounding this complex and contradictory material heritage.

Finland has been notoriously slow at dealing with the dark heritage of the country's colonial past in the North. This has included, for instance, the exploitation of the northern natural and cultural resources, appropriation of Sámi culture for example in the tourism promotion, and a boarding school system that ruptured the Sámi languages for decades. Also, most of our dark heritage work has concentrated on the fringes of the battlefield,

behind the frontlines and on the Homefront. This has been an attempt to gain a more nuanced and holistic picture – and most of the actual battlefields are also east of the current Finnish border. We have found public and community archaeologies to be especially productive tactics to approach these types of questions in a nuanced way (e.g., Banks *et al.* 2017). This work has especially emphasized the multivocality and local importance of the wartime material remains as active agents for transgenerational memories. They have a continued heritage value as silent but vital reminders of the past in the local landscapes and mindscapes across Finland and Sápmi.

Conflict archaeologies beyond Lapland

The conflict archaeology and dark heritage work by the University of Helsinki archaeologists has recently come to cover a wide variety of topics. Work has been interdisciplinary and has included scholars, e.g., from European ethnology, museum studies, cultural heritage studies, and history. These range temporally from the First World War 1914–1918 and the Finnish 1918 Civil War, through the Second World War 1939–1945, to Cold War and the 2015–2016 refugee crisis. Geographically they cover the country from the southernmost tip to the northernmost, and include a wide variety of



Figure 1. Oula Seitsonen, Hannu I. Heikkinen, Vesa-Pekka Herva and Roger Norum survey a German Second World War site at Gilbbesjávri, Sápmi (Fi. Kilpisjärvi). Photo: Oula Seitsonen.

research themes, such as prisoner-of-war camps, mass graves of the Soviet soldiers and prisoners, supply systems and food economy, wartime building projects, defensive lines, military airfields, and so on (e.g., Fast & Väisänen 2018; Seitsonen *et al.* 2019; 2021; Väisänen 2020; Seitsonen & Lundemo 2021). It has also become increasingly common that students in all Finnish archaeology departments work on connected themes from bachelor's level to PhD research (e.g., Kauhanen 2012; Fast 2017; Väisänen 2020; Väisänen *et al.* 2021; Mäkinen *et al.* 2022; Matila 2022).

Various methods and approaches for conflict archaeological work have been developed. These include, for instance, different prospection methods for locating mass graves, using airborne laser scanning data to map vast, landscape-scale military infrastructure, and applying artificial intelligence and machine learning for (semi-)automated site detection (e.g., Väisänen 2018; Seitsonen & Ikäheimo 2021; Stichelbaut *et al.* 2021). Besides purely archaeological methodologies, also artistic and documentary approaches have been tested at Lapland's Second World War sites (Tuominen 2018; van Damme 2019; Bailey n.d.), and our research has recently appeared also in an award-winning international documentary series about the 'Untold Arctic Wars' (Hostikka & Eksymä 2022; Figure 2).

Work related to the Second World War has gained most media visibility in Finland (e.g.,

Merimaa 2018; Kormilainen 2020; Viljanen 2021). This underlines the central place that Second World War histories and their continued retelling has for the Finnish national narrative. These celebrated war stories emphasise the country's role as an underdog surviving against all the odds when fighting the mighty Soviet Union (e.g., Kivimäki 2012; Matila 2020). This narrative has gained recently even more publicity and attention under the ongoing Ukrainian–Russian War in 2022. Wide parallels have been drawn to this 'Winter War 2.0', as the conflict has been popularly referred to in Finland. The analogies include the Ukrainians being undermanned and unified by and in their common fight against the Russian invaders, as well as the use of improvised antitank devices, like Molotov cocktails, and guerrilla attacks against the massive Russian military convoys tied to the roads traversing the steppes.

Continuing, long-term, and future dark heritages

Our dark heritage studies have especially highlighted the long-term effects that wars and other armed conflicts, forced mobilities, evacuations, dislocation, and their aftermaths have, for instance, on children and other vulnerable groups of people (e.g., Seitsonen & Koskinen-Koivisto 2018; Koskinen-Koivisto & Seitsonen 2019; Seitsonen *et al.*



Figure 2. Mikko Suha prospecting Soviet-Ukrainian soldiers gravesite at the renowned Raate Road battlefield with Slingram in front of the film cameras. Photo: Oula Seitsonen.

2019; Seitsonen 2021b). This heart-breaking side of the conflicts has surfaced again even within Europe, after a couple of more peaceful decades following the Wars in the former-Yugoslavian territories. It must be remembered that war and destruction are the harsh reality of existence all around the globe for countless defenceless children, women, and elderly people. However, the ongoing Ukrainian War has brought this significantly closer to Helsinki. In fact, the Ukrainian conflict takes place geographically closer to Helsinki than the northernmost tips of Finland where we have carried our fieldwork. The modern information technology and social media highlight the closeness of the crisis, as it is ever present in our media and news feeds.

Dark heritage studies have assessed in various ways the intentional and unintentional destruction of heritage in conflicts, such as archives and historical sites (e.g., Wollentz 2020; Thomas *et al.* 2019; Fangi *et al.* 2022). This has recently surfaced as ‘archivocide’ in the context of the Ukrainian-Russian War. The Russian invaders have reportedly burned at least one historical archive related to the repression of Ukrainians under the Soviet regime (Interfax-Ukraine 2022; Reid 2022; Ukrinform 2022). Protection and documentation of cultural and natural heritage during past, ongoing, and future conflicts is a theme that needs to be constantly kept in mind in these unstable times.

The state-of-the-art 3-dimensional and other digital documentation methods can offer an important approach for this (Hermon *et al.* 2014; Parkinson *et al.* 2015; Breuer 2022; Fangi *et al.* 2022).

In the context of the Ukrainian conflict and the Annexation of Crimea since 2014, it has become clear how the Russian officials apply historical and heritage connotations as *casus belli* to justify the takeover and occupation of foreign territories. President Vladimir Putin (2015; 2021) has for example drawn on very long historical parallels to suggest that Ukraine should be integrally Russian. He has rationalized the war for the Russian public on the important legacy of the places to the Christianization of Russia and Vladimir the Great (ca. 958–1015 CE), the Crimean War (1853–1856), and Second World War, stating that ‘[E]ach of these places are sacred to us as symbols of Russian military glory and unparalleled proficiency’ (Putin 2015).

The selective use of histories is a good example of the Russian historical memory that Alexander Etkind (2013) has fittingly called ‘multihistorical’. It can be reshaped according to political and cultural needs and is essentially fluid and de-centred. This highlights how the different actors, groups or communities can also appropriate the results of archaeological and heritage research for their own purposes and aims. It must be re-



Figure 3. Right-wing demonstrators in Helsinki on the Finnish Independence Day on 6 December 2019, including members of the far-right and neonazi groups Soldiers of Odin, Nordic Defence League, Blood & Honour, Alliance of Nationalists and Der Dritte Weg. All of these draw inspiration in their symbology from the imaginary ‘Viking’ and Aryan pasts. Photo: Sören Kohlhuber, Finnish Heritage Agency.

membered that various kinds of communities are never monolithic or uniform, even if they might appear so to the outsiders (e.g., Koskinen-Koivisto & Thomas 2017).

This appropriation of archaeology and heritage has recently surfaced for example with the rise of the various right-wing groups that use, largely imaginary, Nordic and ‘Viking’ symbols and mythology. These include, as an example, the ‘Soldiers of Odin’ organisation that has spread over Finland globally. Alongside selected historical symbols, they take advantage of archaeological DNA studies in promoting their extreme and racist agendas (e.g., González-Ruibal *et al.* 2018; Hofmann *et al.* 2021, see also Bonacchi 2022 for wider discussion of heritage being used in populist agendas; Figure 3).

The ongoing and ever-present crises make one rethink the dark heritages and modern conflict archaeologies in new ways. They are not so much

part of the past kept alive by the material remains of the conflicts and the memories that they evoke, but also an unfortunately actively present part of our daily existence. Even if we are not directly affected by any armed conflict, their indirect influences and long-lasting effects are obvious. Most concrete of these for us are the economic effects, as these are felt in our wallets, and the incoming refugees from the warzone. Also, the constant presence of war reporting in media and social media, in addition to the recent traumatic experience of the Covid-19 global pandemic, will likely have some long-term effect on the children and teenagers following it. Such coverage has never been seen before within Europe, illustrating in graphic detail an intra-European conflict. Within this context, the significance of dark heritage research becomes clear, for example for understanding our human reactions to collective trauma, and simultaneously also for planning the future post-conflict periods and reconciliation.

FAFAA: A short story of the Finnish Association of Forensic Archaeology and Anthropology

Oula Seitsonen

Forensic archaeology has a very brief history in Finland. The first excavations were carried out at Lappeenranta Huhtiniemi in eastern Finland in 2006–2007 (Mäkinen *et al.* 2022). Huhtiniemi project aimed to investigate widespread rumours of illegal executions of Finnish soldiers in the area during the Second World War and the clandestine mass graves related to these. Work was carried out in co-operation between the Departments of Archaeology and Forensic Medicine, University of Helsinki, and the Finnish Bureau of Investigation (Keskusrikospoliisi, KRP). During the excavations, we located at the Huhtiniemi campground the mass grave that had originally sparked the rumours, as well as two additional mass graves and some single inhumations. However, all the archaeological, historical and forensic anthropological data showed that the burials were connected to 19th-century activities

in the area. Based on the find material and burial practices, these graves belong to Russian soldiers stationed in Lappeenranta at the time (Finland belonged to the Russian Empire from 1809 to 1917) (Figure 4). The burial site was likely associated with the operation of a Russian military hospital, whose exact location had been forgotten. Forensic archaeology and anthropology could thus conclusively refute the rumours of secret Second World War mass graves and illegal executions of Finnish soldiers at Lappeenranta Huhtiniemi (Lavento *et al.* 2007; Seitsonen & Holappa 2011; Seitsonen 2018b). Unfortunately, the final publication of the Huhtiniemi project never came out, and the public has had to rely on unpublished reports and media outputs for the results (see Taavitsainen 2012; Sandell 2013). As a result, the rumours of the alleged executions have continued to circulate in some circles.



Figure 4. First forensic archaeological excavations in Finland, the studies of 19th century mass graves at Lappeenranta Huhtiniemi in 2006. From left Tiina Mikkonen, Wesa Perttola, Helena Ranta, Kerkko Nordqvist, Mika Lavento, Otso Manninen and Niklas Söderholm. Photo: Oula Seitsonen (2006).

Following the Huhtiniemi studies, in the fall of 2006 some of the participants of the excavations founded 'the Finnish Association of Forensic Archaeology and Anthropology' a.k.a. FAFAA, at the Department of Archaeology, University of Helsinki. FAFAA was established as a professional association and cooperative forum for archaeologists, forensic scientists, police, voluntary rescue service, and other practitioners in the field to promote forensic archaeological and anthropological research and its potential in Finland. Already before the first forensic archaeological studies were carried out in Finland, other Finnish forensic specialists had been actively involved in international forensic research, evaluation, and training work, for instance, in post-conflict settings in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Iraq, and Peru. A key innovator in these studies was Professor emerita and forensic odontologist Helena Ranta, who was one of the founders of the Finnish Forensic Expert Team (FFET) at the University of Helsinki. She was also vital in initiating the interdisciplinary Huhtiniemi project, connecting archaeologists with other forensic researchers. Already in the 1990s, she had asked archaeologists from the University of Helsinki to join in forensic work in

the former-Yugoslavia, which had been quite flatly turned down by then-Professor Ari Siiriäinen with a one-liner, 'That is not archaeology' (pers. comm. A. Siiriäinen 2004; pers. comm. H. Ranta 2006).

Since its founding, FAFAA and its members have been involved in research, training, public relations, and publication work related to forensic archaeology and anthropology in Finland. In 2021, we organized the first 'FAANE – Forensic Anthropology and Archaeology in Northern Europe' seminar at the University of Oulu (Majjanen & Seitsonen 2022). The second seminar will take place in Denmark in 2024. FAFAA has also organized training and workshops on physical anthropology, geophysical prospection, and 3-dimensional documentation methods (Seitsonen 2018b). We have carried out prospection work, for example, at the Finnish Civil War (1918) gravesites at Tammissaari and Santahamina in southern Finland, and most recently, in 2020–2021, members of FAFAA organized the location and verification of rumoured mass graves of Soviet soldiers along the renowned Raate Road battlefield (Figure 5). This work was based on a combination of local transgenerational knowledge and memories, remote sensing, historical aerial im-

agery, and geophysical prospection, and recorded in the YLE documentary series *Untold Arctic Wars* which is now distributed internationally (Hostikka & Eksymä 2022). Currently some active students among the members of FAFAA are also pursuing their doctoral research in themes related to forensic archaeology (Fast & Väisänen 2020; Mäkinen *et al.* 2022).

With the recent upsetting events unfolding in Europe under the Ukrainian-Russian War in 2022–2023, the development and continuation of professional training for forensic archaeologists and anthropologists has become all the more pressing and timely. War crimes and atrocities are ever-present in our times in different parts of the

globe, and international training co-operation for forensic excavation and recovery will be essential in the coming years. For example, in 2022 an archaeology minor study area in human osteology was established at the University of Oulu. In the future, FAFAA will continue to promote and carry on forensic archaeological research in Finland and by Finnish researchers, and will keep on developing new approaches and ways for co-operation between the various actors in the field. It is vital for a professional organisation to maintain close connections with universities and students, to keep them informed of the potential of forensic archaeology and anthropology, and to ensure continuity with new interested professionals initiated in the field.



Figure 5. Teemu Väisänen carrying out geophysical prospecting of Second World War mass graves of Soviet soldiers at the Raate Road Battlefield. Photo: Oula Seitsonen (2020).

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