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# 'Where the F... is Vuotso?': heritage of Second World War forced movement and destruction in a Sámi reindeer herding community in Finnish Lapland

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we discuss the heritage of the WWII evacuation and the so-called 'burning of Lapland' within a Sámi reindeer herding community, and assess how these wartime experiences have moulded, and continue to mould, the ways people memorialise and engage with the WWII material remains. Our focus is on the village of Vuotso, which is home to the southernmost Sámi community in Finland. The Nazi German troops established a large military base there in 1941, and the Germans and the villagers lived as close neighbours for several years. In 1944 the villagers were evacuated before the outbreak of the Finno-German 'Lapland War' of 1944–1945, in which the German troops annihilated their military installations and the civilian infrastructure. Today the ruins of demolished German military installations persist around the village as vivid reminders, and act for the villagers as important active agents in memorising this vital phase in Lapland's recent past. They also appear to facilitate nostalgia for the more independent days before traditional Sámi lifeways were ruptured by stronger Finnish State intervention in the post-war decades.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Material heritage; forced movement; Sámi; Lapland; World War II

The question in the paper's title was recently posed by an acknowledged Indigenous Sámi rock band SomBy (2014) who originate from the village of Vuotso (Sámi: 'Vuohčču'), in Finnish Lapland. Analogous sentiments are encountered in dialogue with the villagers about their Second World War (WWII) heritage, '– Vuotso is never remembered' (M1), and resonate also more widely with the marginalisation of this northern periphery of Europe (Herva et al. 2016).

Vuotso, situated ca. 200 km north of the Arctic Circle, is the southernmost reindeer herding Sámi community in Finland, a 'Gate to Sápmi' ('*Sámi poarta*'), their homeland that stretches across northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Vuotso has an astonishing, yet little known, WWII history and material legacy connected to the German military presence in Lapland. In 1941, the Nazi German troops, co-operating with Finns against the Soviet Union, established a large military complex at Vuotso, and Germans and villagers lived as close neighbours for nearly four years (Figure 1). In 1944, this social order was violently torn apart, after Finland was forced into a ceasefire with the Soviet Union and the villagers were evacuated ahead the outbreak of the Finno-German 'Lapland War'

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**Figure 1.** (Top) Vuotso and other places mentioned in the text; dashed line shows the frontline from 1941 to 1944 (Illustration: Oula Seitsonen); (Bottom) Original caption: 'German brothers-in-arms with a Vuotso reindeer herder in Sodankylä' (SA-kuva 82346/ Sodankylä/18.04.1942).

(1944–1945). In the Lapland War the German troops annihilated their military installations and the civilian infrastructure, leaving Vuotso and most of the other northern settlements in smouldering ruins. After the war, villagers returned to their lands and started their lives again from scratch, but

even today the ruins of demolished German military installations, overtaken by nature, persist around the village as vivid reminders of this period.

In this paper, we discuss the evacuation of civilians and the so-called ‘burning of Lapland’ in 1944, and assess how these experiences have moulded, and continue to mould, the ways in which people memorialise and engage with the WWII material heritage. Our focus is on Vuotso, yet we also refer more widely to northern Finland. First we introduce life-narratives of Vuotso elders, illustrating the local, distinctive perspectives on the WWII-era, after which we discuss how these have affected interpretations of the German material remains. Finally, we compare the local perspectives with the Finnish ‘national narrative’, which tends to leave the Laplanders’ war experiences marginalised (Kivimäki 2012; Tuominen 2015). This demonstrates how the generalised nationwide frameworks are concretely challenged at a local level (Ó Gráda 2001; Yurchuk 2012; Nyssönen 2013). Narratives of the Vuotso Sámi contribute to on-going dialogues on the plurality of marginalised and Indigenous perspectives on cultural heritage and the effects of forced movement on them (Jones 2005; Harrison 2011; Symonds 2011; Convery, Corsane, and Davis 2014; Kuusisto-Arponen 2016). They represent subaltern voices that differ noticeably from the hegemonic ‘national story’ (Spivak 1988; Spangen, Salmi, and Äikäs 2015), and instigate differing mentalities and engagements with the material remains. Besides providing important local perspectives on a traumatic recent past incident, Lapland life-narratives of evacuation, destruction and reconstruction can also highlight more widespread themes related to conflicts and forced and involuntary displacement. These mould in diverse ways people’s perspectives on and attitudes towards their own cultural heritage (Palmberger 2013; Wollentz 2017), and how societies remember hurtful issues (Connerton 1989). In Lapland, these are closely intertwined with the area’s colonial past and emergent postcolonial themes (Källén 2015; Spangen, Salmi, and Äikäs 2015). The issues we discuss have relevance also for the on-going twenty-first Century refugee crises, but addressing these considerations is beyond the scope of this paper (see Seitsonen, Herva, and Kunnari 2017).

## WWII narratives of the Vuotso elders

We have performed conflict archaeological and ethnographic studies in Vuotso since 2010, invited by keen locals (Seitsonen and Herva, [forthcoming](#)). The initiative for this first came from a local history enthusiast interested in promoting and preserving the local WWII heritage: she is originally an outsider who had moved into the community and became integrated into it. She was worried about State land-use plans that threatened the local heritage, and wanted to secure official recognition for it (Herva et al. 2016).

We conducted in-depth interviews in 2015 with the four remaining elders who lived through the wartime, and with the history enthusiast who invited us. On top of these, we have had numerous informal discussions with villagers from different age groups through the years, for instance at the local small lodge, school, and village shop.<sup>2</sup> Our eyewitness informants have also been interviewed for a recent book on village history, in which they are introduced with their names (Aikio-Puoskari and Magga 2010), but we have agreed to keep them anonymous in this international publication. It must be remembered that all the eyewitness memories of the WWII times collected today are from people who were children and teenagers, which the interviewees themselves emphasised, obviously affecting the kind of conditions and experiences they had during the war (Moshenska 2008; Carr 2014, 49; Kuusisto-Arponen 2016). Sentiments encountered at Vuotso resemble those we have seen elsewhere in northern Lapland, although we have not yet completed such in-depth life-story interviews in other places. There are also other recent and ongoing research projects studying the evacuation and reconstruction in Lapland, which will eventually all complement each other (e.g. Tuomaala 2008; Lehtola 2015).

Interviews emphasise in many ways the multi-vocality of recollections: people habitually accentuate and recall the matters closest to their personal lifeworlds. For instance, the reindeer herders’ recollections often revolve around herding-related issues. These exemplify people’s corporeal everyday environmental experiences, related to their sense of place, rootedness, spatial cognition and configuration, and



embodied immersion into the world (Tuan 1977), and the ‘placelessness’ following forced movement and destruction of their habitual spatial settings (Seamon and Sowers 2008; Meriläinen-Hyvärinen 2010; Väyrynen 2012). Together the kaleidoscopic, yet intertwining life-narratives form a web of commemoration (Connerton 1989, 21) of this vital phase in Vuotso’s history, and explain locals’ attitudes towards the material remains.

### **‘Hermans’ in Vuotso 1941–1944**

In the 1940s, Northern Finland was an even more sparsely populated periphery than it is today,<sup>3</sup> and by 1944, there were more German soldiers in the area than local inhabitants. The reason for this arose from the Winter War (1939–1940) between Finland and the Soviet Union, which resulted in heavy losses for Finland. Consequently, the country joined forces with Nazi Germany, anxious that a new war with the Soviet Union was just a matter of time, and allowed German troops to operate in the north. Finland’s ambition in the co-operation was to recover the lost territories and to chase a dream of Greater Finland; despite this, Finland tried to maintain a picture of a separate war effort from the Germans towards the western Allies (Kinnunen and Jokisipilä 2012; Kivimäki 2012).

Initially, German troops got transfer rights through Finland to occupied Norway in 1940 as preparation for Operation Barbarossa, Hitler’s attack on the Soviet Union. However, when this attack was launched in the summer of 1941, the Arctic front soon became stationary, since even the elite Mountain Jaegers (*‘Gebirgsjäger’*) were ill-prepared for the rudimentary infrastructure and arduous conditions they faced in the forest and tundra landscapes (Figure 2). The area was unsuitable for mechanised *‘Blitzkrieg’* warfare, and the German troops became entangled in infrastructure projects behind the frontlines. At the peak of their military build-up over 200,000 German soldiers and about 30,000 multinational Prisoners-of-War (PoW) and forced/slave labourers were stationed in this region (Westerlund



**Figure 2.** Iconic Nattaset fjell landscape outside Vuotso (Photograph: Oula Seitsonen).

2008). This generated an unprecedented air of internationality and an economic boom (Jonas 2012). The German presence in Vuotso was also linked with establishing military infrastructure.

At the time Vuotso had only eight close-knit Sámi households, and had existed as a settled-down village for only a few decades. The first permanent log houses were built after a road came through the area in the 1910s (Figure 3); prior to that, tepee-like *kota*-tents and turf huts were used at seasonal settlements (Aikio and Aikio 2010). Nowadays, Vuotso has become the second largest village in the municipality of Sodankylä, due to the building of large reservoir lakes in the vicinity, which resulted in the forced movement of people in the 1950s–1960s from the lake area to the village as ‘reservoir evacuees’ (Fi. ‘*Allasevakk*’). This is remembered locally as the ‘re-destruction of Sompio’, the first destruction referring to that in 1944 by the Germans. In the 1970s, the villagers of nearby Purnumukka were also resettled in Vuotso as the result of new state-imposed reindeer herding-laws (Lehtola 1994, 223, 224).

All eyewitnesses described local astonishment at the arrival of the Germans in 1941 – or ‘Hermans’ as they often call them – excepting one elderly lady (F1). She casually noted that the ‘outside world’ presented nothing new to her, because her family had been exhibited at fairs in southern Finland and the Baltic countries in the 1930s as examples of the ‘Lapps’ [*sic*] with their tents, reindeer and herding dogs (see Andreassen 2015, 9–11; McKay and Memmott 2016). The Germans established a large military base and airfield at Vuotso, and the Sámi villagers, German troops, multinational PoWs and forced/slave labourers, and Finnish soldiers and workers, lived as close neighbours over three years. Besides German and Austrian soldiers, some workers of *Organisation Todt* and trustworthy prisoners became close personal friends of the Vuotso villagers. Interviews of the local elders opened up many interesting perspectives to the interaction between these groups, but more in-depth discussion of these is beyond the scope of this paper. Here it suffices to note, that generally the relations between Germans and villagers were recalled as warm and sociable. Many German soldiers socialised especially with the



Figure 3. Vuotso Sámi with their reindeer during WWII (SA-kuva 9922/Vuotso/14.04.1940).

children, who had relatively free access to their military bases; this most likely provided the soldiers, far away from home and their own families, with sentiments of at-homeness.

However, in general the era was described as one epitomised by a constant fear, and families spent lot of their time sheltering in temporary *kota*-tent camps outside the village. Soviet air raids on the German airfield in Vuotso were almost daily, and Soviet partisans roamed in the surrounding wilderness, attacking isolated homesteads (Maggä 2010). These attacks, virtually ignored until the collapse of the Soviet Union, took the lives of nearly 200 Finnish civilians in 1941–1944 (Martikainen 2011; Tuominen 2015). The Germans were seen, alongside Finnish soldiers, as guardians of the villagers against the partisans, and living memories of family members murdered in the partisan attacks are a difficult and emotional subject even after seven decades. For instance, one of our informants lost his sister, and her small children, in one of these attacks (M2).

Some tension was experienced between Germans and local men who were on the front and jealous of foreigners staying in their village and living alongside their families. Also darker shades of cohabitation were experienced in Vuotso, such as ill-fated love affairs and illegitimate children, of which the locals were aware, but kept silent about for decades after the war (see Wendisch 2006). Taboo issues such as these, seem to be crucial in dealing with the collective trauma of the Lapland War (Sääskilähti 2015).

### **Evacuation and ‘burning of Lapland’ in 1944**

On a state-level the Finnish-German friendship came to an end in 1944 when a massive Soviet offensive forced Finland to a cease-fire treaty. The treaty demanded German troops to be driven out of the country in two weeks, on an unrealistic timetable, and consequently hostilities between the Finns and Germans were anticipated. Finland feared an invasion or occupation of Lapland by the Soviet Union, and a week before the deadline set by the Soviets, Finnish military headquarters issued an evacuation order for the civilians from the expected northern war zone (Rautio, Kortenieniemi, and Vuopio 2004, 25).

At this stage the Finns and the Germans worked together and there was no break in the contacts on a local level. German trucks and buses transported civilian refugees southwards, while Finnish vehicles carried German military supplies northwards (Lehtola 2003, 365; Tuominen 2015) (Figure 4). In Vuotso, the established social order came to an abrupt halt when the villagers received short notice to wrap up their essentials into a backpack or bundle that they could carry. Germans arranged the evacuation of villagers on trucks south to Sodankylä, and onwards to Rovaniemi. For the Vuotso people, this was their second forced movement in a few years, since they were evacuated westwards to Kittilä during the Winter War in 1939. The situation was chaotic and the evacuees had no idea if they would ever be able to return to their homes. One of our eyewitnesses remembered wondering why her mother was crying when they pulled out from the village in a German truck; she could only think it was a great adventure (F1). Only after growing up and establishing her own life and family in Vuotso, she did understand her mother’s emotions of abandoning a home built with their own hands.

Over 100,000 people, more than 70% of Lapland’s civilians, were evacuated in a few weeks. Many families became divided, also in Vuotso: men were at war, some reindeer herders and their womenfolk took to the pathless fjells with their herds, young women walked the livestock to Sweden which could take over 20 days on foot (F3; Figure 4), and mothers, small children and elders were transported to safety, to Ostrobothnia in western Finland, and to neutral Sweden (Figure 5) (Lehtola 2003, 366; Rautio, Kortenieniemi, and Vuopio 2004). There were already tens of thousands of Finnish refugees in Sweden, and Sweden received on very short notice over 56,000 more people from Lapland (Rautio, Kortenieniemi, and Vuopio 2004, 66).

At first both the Finns and Germans played mock war to please the Soviet officials, but after a couple of weeks this turned hot under increasing Soviet pressure. German troops, feeling and betrayed by their former brothers-in-arms, resorted to scorched earth tactics and destroyed virtually everything within their reach, from military installations to bridges, mile posts, culverts, private property, and livestock; the loss of reindeer, the foundation of herder livelihood and identity, troubled many Sámi families (Ursin 1980; Lehtola 1994, 144–146, 167; Tuominen 2015). At the same time, the Germans





**Figure 4.** (Top) Original caption: 'Loads are unpacked at the Sodankylä church from where the German trucks take the things on to Rovaniemi' SA-kuva 163051/Sodankylä/17.09.1944); (Bottom) Women walking their livestock in Sodankylä towards the Swedish border, note the German soldier controlling the traffic (SA-kuva 163061/Sodankylä/17.09.1944).

were also carrying out scorched earth tactics along the Norwegian northern coast in Finnmark, and forced the local population to exile (Olsen and Witmore 2014; Figenschau 2016). The Germans managed to pull their troops to Norway in the face of an approaching Arctic winter and with the Finnish army on their heels, and by the end of 1944 most of the German army had withdrawn from Finland. However, the last troops left the Lyngen-Stellung in north-westernmost Lapland only in late April 1945 when the Red Army was fighting on the streets of Berlin.



**Figure 5.** (Top) Sámi evacuees in Rovaniemi, original caption: 'Washable Inari Lapps [sic]' (SA-kuva 163077/Rovaniemi/17.09.1944); (Bottom) Swedish soldiers helping Lapland's refugees across the border in Haparanda, Sweden (SA-kuva 163113/Haparanta/19.09.1944).

### **Evacuees in the south**

In the interview material that we have collected and analysed, the time in the south forms the vaguest part of elders' remembrances, yet other researchers have found that memories of the evacuation time can also be very detailed (e.g. Sääskilahti 2013). Evacuation took diverse forms for people from different ethnic and age groups, from different parts of Lapland, and people moved to different places. However, these were all equally traumatising. For instance, Oula Näkkäljärvi (Lehtola 1994, 138,

139) has expressed that the Sámi ‘started dying’, figuratively and literally, when violently drawn away from their homeland, due to a combination of homesickness and poor immunity against diseases. About half of the refugees were children (Figure 5) and the death toll was awfully high amongst them (Rautio, Korteniemi, and Vuopio 2004, 131). As a tragic example, one of our interviewees (M2), then 14 years old, told us that he and his younger brother lost their father to a disease while evacuated in Ostrobothnia, and had to bury him there. Their mother had died before the war, their sister’s family was murdered in a partisan attack in 1943, another sister walked the cows to Sweden where she got married and stayed, and the oldest brother was in the fjells in Lapland with their reindeer. These boys became orphans in their early teens and had to rely on other relatives from Vuotso stationed in the nearby villages to survive through the evacuation far away from home.

For the inhabitants of Lapland’s wilderness, the deportation to Ostrobothnian farmlands or Swedish refugee camps was an outlandish experience, yet not entirely bad. Generally, the evacuees in Ostrobothnia had an easier time, since they often lived and worked on family farms. Vuotso people evacuated there were also lucky to be stationed in neighbouring villages and could keep in contact with their relatives. However, reminiscing their time in the south, the Vuotso Sámi still compare Ostrobothnia’s ‘murky’ rivers with Lapland’s clear streams, and the flat clay fields with their own towering fjells and deep forests (M1–3; Lehtola 1994, 120, 121; 2015). Also, many Sámi people from the remote areas did not speak Finnish, not to mention Swedish, which caused misunderstandings (Lehtola 1994, 133; 2015); the Vuotso villagers had at least a working knowledge of the Finnish language due to the road running by their village.

People evacuated to the Swedish camps suffered a bigger cultural shock. Swedish help was well intentioned, but its implementation was not always well planned. For instance, evacuees were subjected to delousing after crossing the border, which felt especially humiliating as Swedish soldiers watched over the Finnish women and children (Figure 6). Elderly informants remember this as a ‘terribly humiliating welcome’ (F3) and ‘A tit exhibition for Sweden’s soldiers’ (Rautio, Korteniemi, and Vuopio



Figure 6. Delousing Finnish women and children in Haparanda, Sweden (SA-kuva 163126/Haaparanta/19.09.1944).



2004, 81). Semi-nomadic people were also ill-prepared for relocation in large barrack villages, and the food, although plentiful, was strange and alienating (Rautio, Korteniemi, and Vuopio 2004, 121; Lehtola 2015).

### **Ground zero: a destroyed homeland**

The evacuees of Lapland started arriving back to their homeland as soon as possible: first reindeer herders slipped northwards while the fighting was still on, arriving in Vuotso in November 1944. At their old forest campsite near the annihilated and land-mined village these herders found seven hidden, dismantled German plywood tents. Villagers still interpret this as a last friendly act from their former German friends, who in their view chose to provide the villagers with shelter on their return. This theme of 'our Germans' is discussed further below.

During their retreat the Germans had deposited hundreds of thousands of land-mines and other explosives in the landscape, which took hundreds of lives after the war. Most of the villagers returned during the spring and summer of 1945, after the military had de-mined the main roads and the men had prepared rudimentary accommodation for their families, typically log-built saunas. During the reconstruction period the local children took active part in the building efforts and material collecting from the ruins, but also gathered and played with unexploded ordnance (UXO) that they found. Men directed them on how to handle various explosives, but accidents were unavoidable in this dangerous game. One of the village boys was killed by UXO as late as 1959 (Maggä 2010) and several others hurt (see below).

Many people mentioned a twofold feeling of shock and joy when returning to a demolished homeland, but simultaneously catching the first glimpses of familiar landscapes, such as the iconic – and for the Sámi holy – Nattaset fjells next to Vuotso: 'Seeing Nattaset brought tears to my eyes. They were still there, even if the houses were gone' (F1) (Figure 2). Our informants emphasised that despite the dramatic loss of material property and lives, what mattered most was that they still had their land (F1; M1–M3) into which the traditional stories, beliefs and ancestral spirits securely tied them through the personified and lived-in landscape biographies (Lähtenmäki 1999, 210; also Nergård 1997; Collignon 2006; Harrison 2011). In the poorest position were evacuees from regions that were ceded to the Soviet Union: Petsamo, and parts of Salla and Kuusamo. Their whole ways of life became shattered when they lost their ancestral lands. This hit especially badly the semi-nomadic Skolt Sámi; some of whom lived for years in the ruined German-built PoW camps and other temporary shelters in lingering uncertainty until finally they relocated in the 1950s (Lehtola 2003, 386).

Changes in the built environment were profound. In the worst affected areas, such as Inari, about 90% of buildings were destroyed, which had a modernising effect on the infrastructure and housing (Lehtola 1994, 195). However, at Vuotso, owing to its remoteness, people were free to plan their own reconstruction, and built similar log houses on the same spots as before the war. Building materials were scavenged from the ruins left by the Germans, although clandestinely, since the villagers were afraid of what the officials would say about that, and there were rumours that all the German material belonged to the Soviet Union. Also a waste-management company *Lapin Jäte Oy* cleared tonnes of metal objects immediately after the war. Our informants remember that the company was very active for some years and seized rather aggressively even material that people had stockpiled in their yards. Some locals still recall this as 'outright robbery' (M1).

### **'Southern people hate the Germans –': ruptured memories and cultural heritage**

One of our interviewees noted that the 'Tourists always condemn' the Germans for burning Lapland, apparently thinking that is what the locals want to hear, but '– we from whom everything was destroyed don't [condemn]' (F1). The most overarching theme in the memoirs of the local narratives is the emphasis placed on the time before the Lapland War, with congenial neighbourly relations between the villagers, Germans, and their prisoners, at the same time overshadowed by the constant fear of



Soviet air raids and partisans. Conversely, the upsetting evacuation and destruction in 1944 receive less attention in the local recollections, although these are still collectively remembered; especially the return to the destroyed *Sápmi* is recalled in detail. Overall, the memories of German presence throughout Finland are somewhat bipolar; the destruction of Lapland presents a rupture in them, and on the national-level the post-war discomfort of siding with, and living alongside, the Nazis has had an effect on the attitudes towards this period (Herva 2014; Tuominen 2015).

The Vuotso narratives parallel the phenomenological stages of forced relocation outlined by psychologist M.L. Million (1992). Million described the process of forced mobility as an existentially experienced involuntary journey typified by eight stages: (1) becoming uneasy; (2) struggling to stay; (3) having to accept; (4) securing a settlement; (5) searching for the new; (6) starting over; (7) unsettling reminders; and (8) wanting to resettle (also Seamon and Sowers 2008). In the case of the people of Vuotso, the swift evacuation left no time for going through the emotions in stages 1–3, and people were abruptly and violently torn away from their roots, without knowing whether they could ever return to *Sápmi* (also Lehtola 2015). The lack of time allowed to acknowledge the start of their involuntary journey, and the persistent insecurity of the final destination made their already stressful voyage mentally even more incomplete. Also Million's 'securing a settlement' and following stages took place only back home in Vuotso during the reconstruction period. This all might have affected the way people remember and relate to the evacuation. The fragmented, involuntary evacuation journey appears not really incorporated into the people's life-narratives, and memoirs of the evacuee period away from home seem influenced by a general sense of 'placelessness', as people were torn from a state of 'existential insideness' to 'existential outsideness', in Relph's (1976) terms. This mirrors notions of how abrupt traumatic incidents and radical changes in the living environment can cause memory loss and impairment (Koskinen-Koivisto 2011; Sääskilahti 2013). Also, people's remembrances of protracted catastrophes are often weighted towards their early phases (Novick 2000; Ó Gráda 2001), such as the affirmative memories of the pre-Lapland War period that the Vuotso Sámi attach to the overgrown exploded ruins of the German military installations (Figure 7).

Our informants emphasised that 'our Germans – became individuals and friends' instead of a 'faceless mass of uniformed soldiers' (F1; also M1–3; also Eriksen 1995). Locals have also developed their own explanatory frameworks to rationalise and cope with the trauma of how their German friends could destroy their homeland. Typically, this was explained by an assumed change of troops; for instance, parents explained to children that their Austrians had been 'changed to Germans and they are real brutes' (Kairento 2004, 35) who demolished everything. Emphasis is placed on the – real or perceived – little human gestures, such as the discovery of the dismantled plywood tents at Vuotso. In an extreme case the German responsibility of devastation in Vuotso has been denied altogether, and it is blamed on – an imaginary – Soviet partisan unit (F1). Similar unexpected views are encountered also elsewhere in Lapland (F3). This appears to link with the traumatic collective memory caused by the Soviet partisan attacks to the isolated homesteads, and the subsequent view of partisans as a personified evil murdering defenceless women and children.

Generally, no harsh bitterness appears to have been felt towards the Germans, even during the difficult era of reconstruction, characterised by Million's (1992) 'starting over' and 'wanting to resettle' stages. Only some men who chased the Germans to Norway in the Lapland War were more critical (M1), and the loss of reindeer shot by the Germans still seems to instigate sadness in the herders (M1–4). Sámi people often describe that their distinctive cultural identity suffered from the forced migration and resulting involuntary acculturation and stricter State intervention. The most visible effect of this was the mixing of traditional Sámi clothing (*gákti*) with the southern '*lantalainen*' clothes ('*lantalainen*' literally means a 'cow dung person', but apparently originates from the Swedish word meaning land) (Lehtola 1994, 205–210; 2015). Vuotso informants touched upon these themes only indirectly, related to children being taken to the boarding schools after the war, and the resettlement of 'reservoir evacuees' to Vuotso when the artificial lakes were built by the state in the 1950s–1960s.

In the 1950s–1960s, the Germans who had served in Finland during the war started visiting Lapland as tourists, including Vuotso. At first they were hesitant to approach the locals, afraid of how they



**Figure 7.** Overgrown German barrack foundations (Photograph: Oula Seitsonen).

might react, but became positively surprised by the neutral or even friendly reception. One German soldier who had been living in our interviewee's (M2) home during the war visited them several times, and another camped every summer a few nights amongst the barrack ruins for over a decade. One German veteran also dug several times amongst the ruins. The locals supposed he was searching for something left there during the war, but never intervened, thinking that if he had hidden something it was his to search for.

### ***Material memories of lost times***

One consequence of the continued – deliberate or unintentional – state-level neglect of the German presence in Lapland is that the abundant remains of decaying German military sites lack official heritage status (Seitsonen and Herva 2011; Seitsonen 2017). Over the decades these have been largely ignored, and the material remains of the German presence have been often described as rubbish spoiling the pristine natural beauty of the Lapland wilderness. Consequently, the WWII sites are open prey for collectors of war memorabilia (Thomas, Seitsonen, and Herva 2016), and the question of their cultural heritage status has been raised only very recently. Evaluating the value of the German remains is one of the issues we deal with in our on-going research. There are positive signs of increasing awareness that the war remains form a significant part of the local cultural heritage, and the locals show typically a positive attitude towards our studies. They seem especially interested in developing the cultural tourism potential of the sites.

One of our informants, a herder who is intimately familiar with all the material remains in the landscape (M1), stated that he is aware of a lot of things in the landscape but has steadfastly refused to reveal them to outside collectors. He has also taken some finds to the nearby Gold Prospector Museum's collection to salvage them from the hands of outsiders and to provide them with museal curation (Figure 8). He had collected small mementos already during the war, and donated to our



**Figure 8.** (Top) Travelling objects carried along on the evacuation journey and curated throughout the decades: Top left) German bowl used by an Ingrian trusty PoW to bring honey to the local family; (Top right) Personally valuable ceramic vessel concealed by our interviewee into her backpack when evacuated; (Bottom) Small finds salvaged from the WWII sites by local history enthusiasts, wartime photographs, maps, and sketches drawn by one of our interviewees (M2) of the German military installations in Vuotso (Photographs: Oula Seitsonen); (Inset) A German helmet taken to the Gold Prospector Museum by our informant (M1) (Photograph: Gold Prospector Museum).

project some shrapnel and detonators that he had collected, and demonstrated how the kids used to play with them. He also has a collection of American machine gun shells shot from a Soviet fighter plane that attacked him at their doorstep, so as not to forget that incident. This reminds us of Moshenska's



(2008) description that children's shrapnel collections during WWII had possibly personally cathartic dimensions of controlling these potentially deadly and violent mementos (also Carr 2014, 49). Children's games with UXO at Vuotso appear to have had analogous connotations, beyond the thrill of danger and detonation. Indeed, these hazardous and explosive games parallel the destruction of *Sápmi* that they witnessed at an early age.

The villagers' strong sense of ownership and attentiveness in acting as custodians of their local past makes sense as an Indigenous reaction and act of self-identification against Lapland's long colonial history and – real or perceived – marginalisation by southern authorities (Friedman 1992; Nyssönen 2013; Herva et al. 2016). Originally Seitsonen was invited to map the sites around Vuotso due to the villagers' reaction against the state's land-use plans and the actions of an environmental organisation that was cleaning 'war junk' to make Lapland's wilderness 'pristine' again (Herva 2014; Herva et al. 2016). The Vuotso Sámi saw this as a 'southern' intervention: the organisation is based in Rovaniemi, on the Arctic Circle, which gives an idea of the local perception of 'southern'. This organisation's apparently well-intentioned, yet ill-informed, tidying project has been now at least temporarily discontinued, as a result of collaboration between local history enthusiasts, archaeologists, heritage authorities, and National Board of Forestry, but did cause the clearance of over 100 tonnes of military material in 2005–2010 (PLS 2011).

The difference in local attitudes towards, on the one hand, this environmental organisation and the modern collectors, and on the other, the German veteran who dug amongst the ruins in 1950s is intriguing. In the latter case the locals felt he was entitled to search for his own heritage, especially if he had hidden something there himself. Nowadays, Vuotso villagers want deliberately to discourage and prevent outsiders from intervening or removing things from their landscape, since '– they belong where they are' (M1) and '– witnessed what happened here –' (F2), reminiscent of some recent developments in archaeological theories about things, bringing materialities, and the direct engagements with them, into the foreground and giving them place (e.g. Olsen 2013; Pétursdóttir 2013; Kobiálka 2014; Olsen and Witmore 2014; Figenschau 2016). The outwardly nonchalant attitude of the locals towards the material remains is elucidated through the relationality of the traditional Finnish and Sámi worldviews, which escape the dichotomous 'western' categorisations of, for instance, nature and culture (Lähteenmäki 1999, 210; Ingold 2000; Thomas, Seitsonen, and Herva 2016). Generally, the locals' resilient sense of place and particularity of their own land appears vital for defining the communal identities and collective spatial imaginations, both past, present and future (Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto-Arponen 2012).

Interviewees described to us that immediately after the war people were not interested in the ruins beyond their utilitarian value as raw material resources, and wartime experiences were generally not reminisced, except when the men got drunk; this allowed the younger boys their first glimpse into the war stories during the wilderness-based activities (M1). However, by the 1960s, the war-time generation began sharing their recollections (Aikio-Puoskari 2010). Many of the elders were 'story-tellers' who raised children with their narratives, although they tried to keep the most painful topics away from the children's ears, and passed on the communal histories. However, the children of the post-war generation describe that the war tales used to give them nightmares, especially the stories of the shocking partisan attacks (Aikio-Puoskari 2010). To our surprise, even today most of the small schoolchildren in the village are aware of the ruins and of what they signify. The locals occasionally visit the ruins during their herding, hunting, fishing and berry-picking voyages (Aikio-Puoskari 2010) and, according to the present-day children, the elders recall their narratives at these sites. Hence the storytelling tradition appears to have persisted to the current generations, and the material remains around the village seem to actively keep the transgenerational reminiscences alive for many locals. This highlights the importance of storytelling and oral histories as an important form of tying the communal histories and ancestral landscapes together into an eloquent and cognitively controlled web of relations (Nergård 1997; Ruotsala 2002; Länsman 2004; Collignon 2006).

Some families have also cherished mementos of the German presence and of the pre-Lapland War times (Figure 8), such as a German-manufactured bowl curated for seven decades, originally used to



bring honey by an Ingrian prisoner who became a family friend. Another example is a 'travelling object' often treasured by displaced people (Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto-Arponen 2012; Väyrynen 2012), a personally important ceramic vessel. This was a gift from our informant's (F1) father, hidden in her backpack during the evacuation. It is her only personal belonging that survived the war.

Despite the general emphasis given to good memories of the Germans, as opposed to the Soviet partisan terror attacks, also places with darker stories attached to them are remembered and recognised – 'unsettling reminders' (Million 1992). For instance, villagers maintain the memory of a 'hanging' pine – with a sickle and hammer engraved into it after the war – at a nearby PoW camp where the Germans hanged several prisoners. Villagers, including children (Magga-Miettunen 2010), witnessed atrocities and have passed these stories along. According to our interviewees, this place has been acknowledged and remembered in an almost ritualistic manner with repetitive place-bound activities; through the post-war decades people used to, and some still do, stop at that spot and honour what it symbolises, even though the tree itself has fallen years ago. Another example is a virtually unnoticeable pit along a forest road shown to Seitsonen by one informant (M1), which embodies to the locals the memory of a villager who stepped into a mine and died after the war. Also, the site where the boy, mentioned above, died in 1959 when the children were playing with UXO, has been marked by the villagers with stones set in the form of a cross, and is still maintained and remembered (Figure 9).

These sites are characterised by a ghastly 'presence of absence' (e.g. Moran and Disney 2017), conveyed to new generations and still felt at the sites when you are aware of their context. Now both the absent hanging pine and the inconspicuous mine crater are mapped on a recently raised information board in the Purnumukka village next to Vuotso. These were also marked by the members of the public in a crowdsourcing of Second World War sites that we initiated in 2015. A description for the PoW camp states:

in the corner of the camp was a hanging pine, into which a sickle and hammer were carved. Creepy place, where travellers used to stop and touch the tree, I don't know why, but so was the habit [*sic*]. (LDH 2015)



**Figure 9.** Stones set in the form of a cross at the place where a young boy was killed by UXO in 1959; site has been marked by our informant (M1) with a red ribbon to ease locating it in the forest (Photograph: Oula Seitsonen).

In the post-war decades, some of the Vuotso people also visited their families' evacuation places in the south. For instance, one interviewee (M2) visited both the farm where they stayed and his father's grave in Ostrobothnia. Locally, the maintenance of the memory of the German presence has gone, to an extent that even ruins of some post-war logging-sites have been erroneously affiliated to WWII, as one of our informants (M2) told us. Interestingly, he did not mind these false connotations and actually found them a little amusing. What seemed to count for him was that the village stories had been passed on, bringing new generations into the 'narrative and performative formation of place' (Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto-Arponen 2012, 113).

Reflectively, during these discussions with Vuotso people, it occurred to one of us (Seitsonen) that although his family originates from the ceded areas, he deems about the material remains and memories of their lost ancestral homeland, now east of the modern Finnish border, largely in the same way as the Vuotso villagers signify their own ruins. His grandparents started actively remembering the war years towards the end of their lives, and this gave an initial spark for his interest in the WWII-era. In his case, the small mementos, 'travelling objects', such as trench art, pre-war maps, and grandparents' weapons, act as active agents of recollection. These recreate memories also to the next generations, including his own young children to whom he has already passed some of the stories. Thus, the study of WWII materialities in Vuotso turned out also to be a journey to his own family-history.

## Conclusion: 'national story' and Vuotso life-narratives

The Vuotso narratives and views on the WWII ruins offer interesting insights into the local northern significance of the material memories of the German military presence in Lapland in 1941–1944. These represent truly subaltern voices, and illustrate how national level histories, often governed by the powerful images of destruction in the Lapland War, can hide subtler and locally important themes (Seitsonen and Herva, *forthcoming*). Elders' life narratives highlight the importance of including and acknowledging the plurality and multi-vocality of local voices, which may contradict with the 'national master narrative'. In Table 1 we have collected the most evident differences between the national and the Vuotso perspectives.

Until recently, the national master narrative downplayed the Finnish-German relations. Conversely, in Vuotso the recollections of personal and familial ties between Finns and Germans have been important and accentuated throughout the post-war decades, and the remembrance of these has become transgenerational as stories were passed on. The unprecedented internationalism caused by the German

**Table 1.** Main differences between the national and the Vuotso perspectives on WWII heritage.

Themes	'National narrative'	Vuotso
Finno-German co-operation in 1940–1944	Downplayed especially during the cold war, relatively little known in public; post-war shame of siding with Nazis	Political side little regarded, local and private level well-remembered and highly important; close neighbours, personal friendship
German presence in Lapland	Downplayed; still complicated and politically loaded	Positive personal and communal memories; personal contacts with individual Germans and PoWs emphasised, internationalism of the era
Inhuman treatment of PoWs and forced and slave labourers	Little regarded or known of until very recently (Westerlund 2008)	Remembered and saddening; personal relations and friendship with PoWs, harsh treatment and punishments reminisced (e.g. hanging place still commemorated)
Soviet partisan attacks against the Finnish civilians	Essentially denied until the collapse of Soviet Union, acknowledged only since 1990s; more wide-spread research into the subject is only commencing	Important, commemorated and personally tragic; partisans roamed in the wilderness around Vuotso and many villagers lost their relatives in the attacks; Finnish and German soldiers seen as the protectors of women and children against the partisans
'Burning of Lapland' in 1944	Highlighted and dominant; bitterness of destruction, danger of UXO and mines; Germans as 'Lapland-burners' and 'church-burners'; ambiguous material legacy, German 'war junk' polluting the pure Lapland wilderness; images of destruction by explosion and fire an active agent of remembrance	Remembered, but not dominant; little human gestures highlighted, such as the leaving of hidden tents in Vuotso; own explanatory frameworks for coping with the trauma (denial: responsibility of destruction blamed on Soviet partisans); material heritage (exploded German military installations and small finds known to all locals) an active agent of remembrance

soldiers and their multinational prisoners is also highlighted in the Vuotso remembrances. Two other themes that the Vuotso narratives emphasise, but the national narrative has largely marginalised, are the presence and inhumane treatment of PoWs (Westerlund 2008), and the Soviet partisan attacks against the local civilians (Martikainen 2011).

Most importantly, views on the 'burning of Lapland' – nationally the best remembered episode of WWII in Lapland – differ on a local level strikingly from the generalised views. We have argued elsewhere that on a national-level the powerful, symbolic images of devastation by explosion and flames, and the danger of UXO appear to act as agents for memorialising the German presence in Lapland (Seitsonen and Herva, [forthcoming](#)). These images promote ambiguous attitudes towards the material remains, which might then appear as haunting, out-of-place and potentially dangerous reminders of a faceless Nazi war-machine (Herva 2014). Conversely, in Lapland the local people maintain their own regional narratives, which typically emphasise the times before the destruction in 1944. For the locals, the ruins appear to act as active agents embodying and conveying the memory of the times when the locals and Germans still lived as congenial neighbours, yet simultaneously, of the times coloured by a constant fear of the Soviet attacks.

WWII memory of the German presence seems to be realised and mediated locally by the ruins and small finds in the local landscape, which appear also to have cathartic associations. These are essentially reconciling with the past, as articulated in the local social space, and shaping the present and influencing the future (Huysen 1995, 3; Yurchuk 2012). The highly personal and familial ties to the material remains (Herva et al. 2016) promote very different attitudes towards them than those held by outsiders, who apparently often see these merely as 'war junk' with a dubious pedigree (Herva 2014).

These differing mind-sets appear to resonate with various wider issues related to Lapland's colonial history. In the post-war reconstruction period, the Finnish state took a stronger hold of *Sápmi*, resulting in widespread acculturation (Lehtola 1994, 191–224; 2015). The whole of Lapland went through an unprecedented rupture of Sámi lifeways and state-imposed exploitation of their habitual herding landscapes (Lehtola 1994, 224; 2015). German WWII ruins might thus also facilitate nostalgia (Cashman 2006; Carr 2014, 52) for the lost days of independence and traditional Sámi lifestyle before the tearing down of established social order and loss of property and lives in the Lapland War, and the subsequent stricter state intervention and tighter assimilation of the Sámi into Finnish society. Through the clearing of 'war junk' by the Rovaniemi-based environmental organisation, and the subsequent disapproval by the locals, the German remains have become closely tied with the north-south confrontations and postcolonial questions (Källén 2015; Spangen, Salmi, and Äikäs 2015).

The Vuotso life-narratives and commemorations related to the German WWII remains remind us vividly of the strong agency that material culture can have in the formation of communal and individual identities and bodily memories (Macdonald 2006; Koskinen-Koivisto 2011), and how the materialities can convey multiple meanings beyond their immediate historical or cultural context. Importantly, based on our preliminary surveys, analogous sentiments towards the German material traces appear to be widespread also elsewhere in Finnish Lapland.

### **Interviews (the records will be stored in the national Sámi archives, Inari, as well as in the Lapland provincial archives, Oulu)**

F1. Female, born 1931, Vuotso; 67 min interview. 9 August 2015, Vuotso, Finland. Interviewers: Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto and Oula Seitsonen.

F2. Female, born 1949, Rovaniemi; 71 min interview. 7 June 2015, Vuotso, Finland. Interviewers: Vesa-Pekka Herva, Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto and Oula Seitsonen.

F3. Female, born 1923, Torvinen; 145 min interview (not recorded according to her wish). 11 June 2016, Kusfors, Sweden. Interviewers: Mika Kunnari, Oula Seitsonen and Maria Persson.

M1. Male, born 1939, Vuotso; 60 min interview. 9 August 2015, Vuotso, Finland. Interviewers: Vesa-Pekka Herva, Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto and Oula Seitsonen.

M2. Male, born 1930, Vuotso; 70 min interview. 10 August 2015, Vuotso, Finland. Interviewers: Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto and Oula Seitsonen.

M3. Male, born 1934, Vuotso; 48 min interview. 10 August 2015, Vuotso, Finland. Interviewers: Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto and Oula Seitsonen.

## Geolocation information

Vuotso, Sodankylä, Lapland, Finland, N 68.103118/E 27.126045.

## Notes

1. All translations from Finnish and Sámi by the authors.
2. The Village of Vuotso has nowadays 350 residents most of whom are Indigenous Sámi. In 2015 the school that hosts classes from preschool to upper secondary school had 28 pupils. The school offers classes in both Finnish and Sámi (<https://peda.net/sodankyla/koulujen-sivut/vuotso>).
3. Population of Lapland in 1940s was about 130,000 (Tilastokeskus 1979, 290), currently there are about 183,000 people.

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