

Photo essay

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The haunting and blessing of Kankiniemi: Coping with the ghosts of the Second World War in northernmost Finland

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Abstract

Modern industrialized war and the supernatural may seem odd bedfellows, but recent research has indicated that this relationship is much more important than has traditionally been recognized. This photo essay considers the haunting presence of a WW2 German prisoner-of-war camp for Soviet inmates in the environmental and cultural context of Finnish Lapland, or Sápmi, the homeland of the indigenous Sámi, which has long featured as an exotic and enchanted land in the European imagination. During our fieldwork at German prisoner camps in Lapland, we have come across some peculiar finds and features, including a heart carved on a pine tree at the site of Kankiniemi. We discuss this carving in relation to the stories and experiences of the supernatural associated with former German military sites and consider some broader implications of such stories and experiences from a heritage point of view.

Keywords: Lapland, Second World War, Prisoner-of-War, haunting, memorial service

The Second World War left Northern Finland with a difficult and conflicting legacy, as Finland first cooperated with Nazi Germany in the north and then fought a war against it, which resulted in the extensive destruction of Finnish Lapland. There is a wealth of tangible and intangible traces of WW2 in Northern Finnish landscapes and mindscapes, including stories of haunting and the supernatural related to the war and its heritage. Modern industrialized war and the supernatural may seem odd bedfellows, but recent research has indicated that this relationship is much more important than has traditionally been recognized (e.g. MacKenzie 2017). Importantly, too, the stories and experiences of the supernatural during and after the war are not just anecdotal curiosities, but provide perspectives on much broader issues, such as confrontations between the North and the South, land rights, and colonialism and de-colonialization in the context of the European Arctic.

This photo essay considers the haunting presence of a WW2 German prisoner-of-war (POW) camp for Soviet inmates in the environmental and cultural context of Finnish Lapland, or Sápmi,

the homeland of the indigenous Saami, which has long featured as an exotic and enchanted land in the European imagination (e.g. Naum 2016). Tourism marketing in Lapland, for instance, still eagerly employs such cultural images.

As a result of the Finnish cooperation with Germany from 1940 to 1944, over 200,000 German troops came to be based in Northern Finland, together with about 30,000 Soviet and other POWs and forced labourers used as workforce for various German projects. We have studied this German WW2 heritage in Lapland from various viewpoints within the ‘Lapland’s Dark Heritage’ project (Thomas 2018) and have come across some peculiar finds and features. In 2015, we conducted small-scale excavations at the site of Kankiniemi, which was a small POW camp in the forests of Anár (Fi. Inari). The site was used as a logging work camp, with trees felled and transported to the shore of Lake Anár to be floated to sawmills. Prisoners working at the camp were mostly Soviet POWs, according to local memories and names marked on the orthodox crosses that marked some graves found near the site after the war.

After the war Kankiniemi was forgotten in the woods for decades, except for the locals who maintained the memory of the camp and its inhabitants, both prisoners and German soldiers, until the site was mapped during a heritage survey in the early 2000s. Kankiniemi was also one of the sites that was marked in a public online crowdsourcing of German WW2 sites that we organized, with the following description given in the spring of 2015:

“A POW camp surrounded by a still partly standing barbed wire fence. A heart has been carved into a pine outside the camp’s fence, maybe by some prisoner [sic].” (Lapland’s Dark Heritage 2015; our translation)

This sent us looking for the heart in the pines surrounding the camp, and we located it at one corner of the guard path encircling the remains of the barbed wire fence (Fig. 10.1). A local man who grew up playing in the area informed us that the heart was there already in the late 1950s, but he did not know who had made it; he suspected that it had been carved after the war. A relative of his told us that in the early 1950s he had located two graves with Orthodox crosses on top of a small hill just behind the camp. The local police had asked him to open the graves with the intention of reburying the bodies in a collective POW burial in the graveyard of the nearby Ivalo village. When asked about the heart, he avoided the question and changed the subject. There is an old and well-known Finnish rural tradition of *karsikko*, manipulating trees during funeral proceedings, to mark or strengthen the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead (e.g. Waronen 2009 [1898]: 97). The heart at Kankiniemi could be considered a modern variant of the tradition and is, probably significantly, carved on the boundary between the ‘open’ world and the confined world of the prisoners.

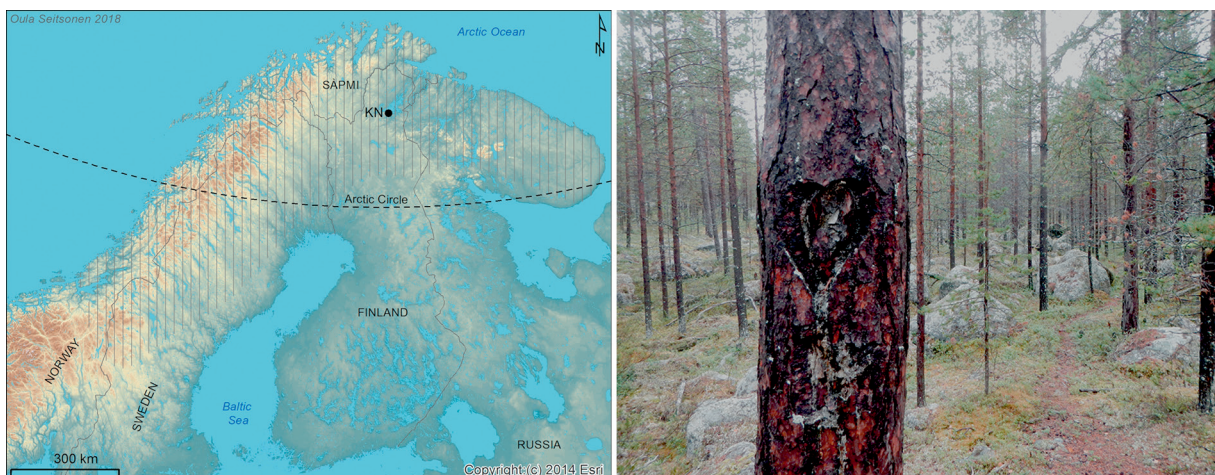


Figure 10.1. Left) The location of the Kankiniemi POW camp (KN) in Finnish Lapland; Right) A heart carved into a pine tree at the corner of the prisoner area, with the guard path surrounding it on the right. (Photograph: O. Seitsonen.)

In August 2016, we organized a public excavation in the village of Anár, in collaboration with the local Sámi museum Siida, and worked for a week with very enthusiastic volunteers who were mainly middle-aged men and women, of different professions, from around Finland and with an interest in Sápmi/Lapland, archaeology and/or WW2. One evening, two of our volunteers called us to ask for directions to Kankiniemi so they could visit the site on their own. Next morning at the excavations, they shared with us their feelings and experiences of the site the previous evening. In the grey and rainy evening, our volunteers had been overpowered by the melancholic and desolate feeling of the place, and going through their photographs later in the evening, they discovered that one photograph appeared to have a ghostly figure standing in front of the remains of the kitchen building in the POW area of the camp. Unnerved, they deleted the photograph but, at our request, drew us a picture of the man they had seen in the image: a narrow-faced, gaunt man with a bandage around his head and one wounded eye. A little later this experience became linked to a dream that the mother of one of these two volunteers had had unaware of her daughter's strange experience in Lapland.

Whatever one makes of that evening at Kankiniemi and its aftermath, one thing is certain: the visit to the site affected our volunteers very strongly. Upset by the experience, they contacted us to ask if we thought it would be appropriate to consult the Greek Orthodox priest of the parish to enquire about the possibility of arranging some kind of a blessing of the site. The priest, Father Rauno Pietarinen, suggested that an Orthodox cross could be raised at the site and a service held there in memory of those who had suffered and died at Kankiniemi during the war. Father Pietarinen had previous experience of holding similar memorial services and setting up crosses at other WW2 sites, including a battlefield in Eastern Lapland.

Our public excavations, then, resulted in a rather unexpected form of public outreach and community engagement. In early October the same year, we went to the site with Father Pietarinen to choose a spot that felt right for the cross and put it up. He chose an open area on the border of the prisoner and German areas. The blessing ceremony, organized by Father Pietarinen as part of his pastoral duties, was the next day, when the three of us went to the site early in the morning, lit a fire, and pondered how many community members would turn up and take part in the service. When the ceremony began, over twenty people were present.



Figure 10.2. Raising the Orthodox cross at Kankiniemi the day before the memorial service. Left) Vesa-Pekka Herva and Father Rauno Pietarinen carrying the cross and tools to the site; Right) Father Pietarinen digging a foundation for the cross. He crafts the crosses for memorials himself. (Photographs: O. Seitsonen.)



Figure 10.3. Top) Vesa-Pekka Herva starting the fire at the site before the service. Father Pietarinen asked us to light it to get coffee after the service, but also because clouds of smoke make communion with the spirits easier; Bottom) Father Pietarinen checking whether his wristwatch had stopped working, as no other people than his four-person Orthodox choir had shown up. (Photograph: O. Seitsonen.)



Figure 10.4. In the end, the memorial service turned out to be surprisingly popular. Over twenty people showed up at this remote spot in the forest in the drizzling, cold fall rain, including several volunteers from our public excavations and their local relatives, other locals, and a journalist from the local newspaper. (Photograph: O. Seitsonen.)



Figure 10.5. Vesa-Pekka Herva reminding everyone before the start of the service briefly of how the tragic events that took place at this remote camp and elsewhere in the wilderness of Lapland during the war are even today a reality for numerous people around the world, and that remembering the fates of dislocated people, prisoners of war, and refugees is very timely. (Photograph: O. Seitsonen.)



Figure 10.6. Father Pietarinen holding the service. (Photograph: O. Seitsonen.)



Figure 10.7. The long memorial service, designed by Father Pietarinen, included many phases, such as an anticlockwise procession around the camp following the former guard path surrounding the prisoner area and sprinkling the area with holy water, brought the same morning in a plastic bottle from the Skolt Sámi church at Sevettijärvi. (Photograph: V-P. Herva.)



Figure 10.8. Our volunteers placing flowers at the cross. (Photograph: O. Seitsonen.)



Figure 10.9. After the memorial service, coffee was made and hunting stories, among others, were exchanged by the fire. (Photograph: O. Seitsonen.)



Figure 10.10. The inscription and memorial plaque for the cross were designed and provided by the volunteers. The plaque says: "This cross is raised to commemorate those who died at the Kankiniemi prison camp during the Second World War 1941–1944". On the crossbeams is paraphernalia from the service, such as a paper cup filled with holy water. (Photograph: O. Seitsonen.)



Figure 10.11. View over the site after the service with the newly erected cross, fresh flowers, and dying fire. (Photograph: O. Seitsonen.)

The ceremony was eye-opening to us in many ways and concretized or provided illustration to various more abstract theoretical ideas and concepts. For one thing, the Kankiniemi case shows the power of certain sites – presumably due to various tangible and intangible factors – to affect people on deep emotional levels, irrespective of what specific form or expression the experiences at such sites may take. Likewise, the memorial service provided clues about local perceptions of and relationships with the surrounding world, which is entangled with the magical or enchanted reality of the North, as described, however (in)accurately, in the accounts of the European far North since the early modern period (see Naum 2016; Herva and Lahelma 2019).

The northern world or modes of being in the world are characterized by a deep entanglement of human and non-human worlds, as well as material and spiritual worlds, and this was in evidence also at this event, which mixed typically Orthodox elements with elements of traditional folk religion. As for the former, the blessing involved a procession around the camp while sprinkling holy water along the way. One of us (Seitsonen) had the honour of carrying a paper cup filled with holy water in the pageant – and was worried about tripping and spilling it along the uneven path. The service also included circling the cross itself three times anticlockwise while sprinkling it with the holy water, and all the chants for remembering the dead were read thrice.

When the formal service was over, Father Pietarinen explained to the audience the rationale of the service – that is, how it was intended to work. He described it as a kind of ‘spiritual time travel’, explaining that remembering, in the context of the blessing ceremony, those who had suffered and died at the camp was intended to comfort those people during the war when they were still alive. He continued that while this appears to go against common sense and logic – changing the past from the present – such spiritual time travelling works through God. The blessing of the site was about asking God to comfort the suffering people in the past, and for God there is no separation between the past, present, and future, as He is timeless and eternal. In this way, the ceremony sought to ‘pacify’ the place and ease its ‘bad air’ in general, not in relation to the specific haunting experience that the site inflicted on an August evening.

The formal ceremony was followed by placing flowers in front of the cross (Fig. 10.8) and having coffee together, made on the open fire. The local participants of the service had brought a bottle of strong alcohol to make a toast with at the cross and to make a libation for the deceased. This could seem like a trivial detail, but it is embedded in the traditional northern worldview that acknowledges the (spiritual) power of alcohol (Fi. *viinanväki*), the special supernatural potency residing in alcohol; such powers exist in a broad range of substances, such as soil and iron (e.g. Krohn 2008 [1894]: 41; Pulkkinen 2014: 189). Making libations and taking a drink of alcohol was a typical practice at sacred *karsikko* trees that, as mentioned earlier, served to commemorate deceased persons and to delineate the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead (e.g. Waronen 2009 [1898]: 97; Pulkkinen 2014: 173). The heart carved on the pine tree at the site is reminiscent of this old tradition and the memorial cross works more or less the same way, as a powerful and visible symbol of the border and intra-site division between prisoner and guard areas, associated with Christian beliefs and supernatural powers.

During the after-service socializing, the participants reflected on their perceptions of and feelings about the ceremony in a manner that echoed the northern ways of relating to and engaging with the environment, characterized by the deep entanglement of the natural and supernatural and the material and spiritual dimensions of reality (e.g. Ingold 2000; Herva and Lahelma 2019). This relational mode of knowing and being in the world entails close attentiveness to one’s environment. For instance, the participants had paid attention to changes in the wind during the service, especially a blast towards the end of the ceremony that made two dry pine trees leaning on each other squeak loudly. Likewise, they had noticed how, at the very end of the service, a strong wind blew across the site and then calmed down, giving a ‘cleansing’ feeling to the blast. It is interesting to note here that in rural folk

traditions, the squeaking of trees leaning against each other has been taken to signify the restless soul of someone who had died in the forest before their time (e.g. Paulaharju 1908: 41; Pulkkinen 2014: 74). The stories and experiences of haunting and the supernatural can be considered to be grounded in this kind of intimate awareness and perception of the environment.

Ghosts and hauntings exemplify in a particularly clear manner how the past can have a 'living' presence in the present. WW2 prisoner camps, particularly in more remote and sometimes eerie locations in Lapland, have a particularly strong 'haunting potential'. Sites related to death and suffering – such as prison camps, hospitals, and mass graves – are frequently surrounded by stories of haunting, ghosts, and supernatural experiences. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the view that the locals who lived close to the Germans and their prisoners during the war were familiar with the mistreatment and sufferings of both POWs and soldiers at these sites. In part, then, the haunting character of this heritage is probably related to the suppressed difficult memories of the war (Herva 2014; Seitsonen 2018: 126–129; see Carr 2017, 2018 for the British Isles).

Various prison camp sites do have an oppressive and disturbing character to them as places, making it readily understandable why they should provoke strange feelings. Several seasons of mapping and digging alone at Kankiniemi and other related sites have made us familiar with such feelings. These places often do have a certain lonely and gloomy atmosphere, which is accentuated by the enduring silence of Lapland's wilderness, with only the occasional caws of crows and the footsteps of passing reindeer to be heard. Supernatural experiences at WW2 sites and their connections to, or resonance with, broader issues illustrate well the porous, fluid, and heterogenous understandings of time and pasts related to northern worldviews and ways of being in the world.

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