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# Sind wir noch Freunde?

Displaying the difficult history of the German presence  
in Finnish Lapland, 1941–44.

**Abstract** During the Second World War, Finland allied with Germany in the battles against the Soviet Union. The end of this alliance, however, led to a conflict known as the Lapland War. Still after 70 years, some Finns face difficulties in acknowledging and engaging with this period of their history. This is illustrated particularly well in the recent exhibition *Wir waren Freunde/Olimme ystäviä* (We Were Friends), which was on display at the Provincial Museum of Lapland in Rovaniemi. The exhibition covered the experiences of both local residents – Finns and indigenous Sámi – and the German soldiers and other arrivals (such as Soviet prisoners of war) posted in Lapland from 1940–44. The exhibition ran from April 2015 to January 2016. The exhibition received mainly positive feedback from both media and museum visitors, but also other, equally strong but negative (and sometimes surprising) reactions.

**Keywords** dark heritage, museum exhibition, Second World War, Finnish Lapland

## Introduction

In this chapter we outline some of key findings of the visitor survey that we carried out at the Provincial Museum of Lapland in Rovaniemi, Finland, during a particular temporary exhibition. *Wir waren Freunde* (We Were Friends) opened on 27 April 2015, and closed on 10 January 2016. The exhibition addressed the period, from 1940–44, when Finland – and the Lapland region in particular – received German troops stationed there as part of Hitler’s Operation Barbarossa during the Second World War (WWII). *Wir waren Freunde* thus refers to the time when Finland and Germany were brothers-in-arms (officially a co-belligerency rather a formal alliance). This co-belligerency took place after Finland, in fear of a new attack from Soviet Red Army, desperately needed financial help: military equipment, everyday commodities and food. Germany, on the other hand, had plans to access the mines of Pechenga and the routes of the Arctic Ocean (Mann and Jörgensen 2002). Finland allowed the German army and its approximately 200,000 German soldiers to operate freely in the vast area of Finnish Lapland, and to establish their Northern headquarters to the region’s capital, Rovaniemi. The cohabitation between local Finnish and Sámi and the Germans was for the most part friendly. In many townships, the arrival of Germans meant well-paid opportunities for work and trade, and thus access to better livelihoods and material goods. Nonetheless, this coexistence ended in violence with the outbreak of the Lapland War in Autumn 1944, following a Finno-Soviet treaty which compelled Finland to expel the German military from within its borders. The scorched earth tactics applied by Germans as a response to this caused significant damage to the infrastructure and dwellings in the area and is today referred as ‘the burning of Lapland’ (e.g. Mann and Jörgensen 2002; Tuominen 2005).

*Wir waren Freunde* was organized in a thematic way, so that as visitors moved around the exhibition space, following a general introduction, they encountered sections on different aspects of everyday life during the period with the German military presence. Themes covered included the media during that time, showing examples of wartime propaganda newspapers in both Germans and Finnish; trade and especially barter between the locals and the Germans; prisoner of war camps; romance between German soldiers and local women, and the aftermath – including a small section about the construction of and reactions to a German military mausoleum outside of Rovaniemi in a place called Norvajärvi (also Koskinen-Koivisto 2016).

An evocative soundscape is provided by a recording of the infamous German military marching song *Erika*, commonly associated with the German *Wehrmacht*.

We were particularly interested in this exhibition in the context of our wider research project *Lapland's Dark Heritage*, which examined different interactions with the material legacy of the WWII German military presence in Finnish Lapland. Although a temporary exhibition, *Wir waren Freunde* also stood out as unusual for focussing as it did specifically on Lapland's WWII experiences – an aspect of Finland's official wartime narrative that is often neglected elsewhere in official museum interpretation (Thomas and Koskinen-Koivisto 2016).

## Methods

We employed a relatively straightforward data collection method of using a questionnaire survey in paper form, which was placed at the end of the exhibition for visitors to fill out if they wished. We did this in partnership with the Provincial Museum of Lapland staff, who kept the paper piles replenished and took responsibility for collecting the survey papers together to send to us for analysis. Questionnaire surveys of museum visitors are a common approach (e.g. Hooper-Greenhill 2006), and allow for data to be collected even when the researchers are unable to be present the whole time, as was the case for us with this exhibition (the research team based in Helsinki, many kilometers from Rovaniemi). Whilst we must also acknowledge the limitations of such an approach, for example that visitors' 'immediate aesthetic reactions in the exhibition halls could not be observed', but rather their recollections of aspects of the exhibition only afterwards (Kirchberg and Tröndle 2012, 448), for practical and resource reasons it was the best approach available for us for this particular study. The questionnaire was made available in both Finnish and English, and included a short preamble explaining the survey and linking it to the wider research project:

Thank you for picking up this visitor questionnaire! The questions should not take more than a few minutes of your time. Your answers will help Arktikum staff evaluate the exhibition, and will also contribute to a research project being carried out by staff from the Universities of Helsinki and Oulu, funded by the Academy of Finland. You can find out more about this project by

visiting <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/lapland-dark-heritage>. Any data used for the research will be anonymised.

Placed on the table at the exit of the interview, along with the questionnaires themselves, were pens and pencils for visitors to use, and a letterbox in which to place completed questionnaires. The questions covered a range of topics, from standard marketing questions about place of residence, age, gender and how many people were in the respondent's party visiting the exhibition, through to qualitative and quantitative questions about the exhibition's content. So, visitors were asked to rate the exhibition and their enjoyment of (excellent – good – average – poor – disappointing), and whether they felt they had learned something new. Yet they were also asked to highlight which part of the exhibition they found the most meaningful. As free-text fields, we asked which section was their favourite, which section in their opinion was the least interesting section, and what kinds of emotions the exhibition evoked, if any (not really – positive – negative – contradictory – other). We also asked respondents if they had any personal experiences or family connections to WWII, and in particular to the German presence in Finnish Lapland and if they have carried out any sort of personal or family research into this particular history.

The ways in which respondents answered to the survey varied significantly; some only ticked multiple choice options and did not answer any of the open questions, whereas others wrote very long and considered, often quite emotional, free-text responses. We also noticed that a few respondents had only filled in one side of the two-sided questionnaire, perhaps not noticing that there were more questions on the reverse side.

## Results

When we initially came up with the idea to leave a questionnaire survey at the exit of the exhibition, it was with the assumed knowledge that people generally do not enjoy, or perceive the process as being time-consuming and unrewarding, and thus do not fill in, paper questionnaire surveys on a regular basis, for example possibly finding them impersonal (Wilkinson and Birmingham 2003, 10). In our case, we collected some 478 responses in total. Statistics provided to us from the Provincial Museum of Lapland show that for the year 2015, there were 91,143 visitors to the whole museum (with the

exhibition running from late April that year until mid-January the next). The museum does not monitor the visitor numbers to individual exhibition spaces within the museum itself, but assuming that around a little less than a third of the number above did not visit due to the exhibition not being open when they visited, this would equate to approximately 60,800 people who could have visited the exhibition. If this is the case, we can estimate a response rate of around 0.8%. This figure is a very rough estimate however, based on the limited and approximate data that we have. If more people visited over the year during certain seasons (such as summer or mid-winter, when many families visit Rovaniemi to visit the Santa Clause Village), it is possible that the figures over these periods were higher. If not all museum visitors entered the *Wir waren Freunde* exhibition space, then we again have a higher percentage than indicated of the visitors who did go. We were pleased to attract several hundred responses and consider this meaningful data, although have also to acknowledge that it is likely a low percentage of the actual total of museum visitors during that time.

We have focused elsewhere on the critical aspects of the exhibition as representing a form of ‘difficult’ or ‘dark’ heritage (see Koskinen-Koivisto and Thomas 2017 for discussion of the concept), and the differing perspectives of visitors of different backgrounds in this context (Seitsonen et al. 2018). Therefore in this particular chapter we focus on the reactions of visitors to specific sections and themes of the exhibition. This is highlighted particularly in free-text responses in the survey, some of which we quote in the following Analysis section.

## Analysis

Analyzing the background of the visitors who answered the survey, we learned that 68% of them were Finnish and 32% were from outside of Finland. In other words, we had 326 Finnish respondents and 152 respondents from other countries. About 22% of Finnish respondents (104 in total) were local people from Rovaniemi itself. The majority of Finnish visitors (70%), were familiar with the theme of the exhibition, and many reported that they had family members who had experienced WWII and interacted with the Germans during that time. The same amount of foreign visitors, most of whom came to see the exhibition as part of the wider Arktikum exhibition centre where the Provincial Museum of Lapland is housed, had not heard of

the exhibition before and did not have previous knowledge of the collaboration between Finland and Germany during WWII. About 30% of local visitors had heard and read about the exhibition in advance in media (Seitsonen et al. 2018).

The majority of all responses about the general impressions about the exhibition were positive or neutral. Some 90.5% of the visitors found the exhibition excellent or good, (6.7% found it average, and only 2.7% found it poor or disappointing). Many respondents of the visitor survey brought up the exhibition's focus on ordinary people in their open answers and comments. We (Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto or Mirikka Hekkurainen) have translated the Finnish responses into English, and feature some representative general quotes here: "At the end [it is about] ordinary people encountering each other under exceptional circumstances." "I liked the focus on human beings in war time, rather than military strategies." These remarks catch the very idea of the exhibition that was welcomed by many the respondents. According to many Finnish respondents, this approach represents the "untold" side of the war story: "So wonderful that you dared to disclose another 'untold' perspective too, which has been reality for the people who lived here."

The visitors who came from Germany, on their part, seemed especially appreciative of the fact that also Germans were seen as regular human beings in the context of WWII. One German visitor saw the exhibition as "honest and objective", and another commented that it was the first time that he had seen an exhibition where WWII era Germans are portrayed as something else than monsters. These thoughts resonate with the notions of reflexive attitudes of people who visit dark heritage sites such as the German cemetery of Norvajärvi, situated just north of Rovaniemi. The Finnish visitors who wrote about their experiences in social media, had pondered upon the young age of fallen soldiers, their situations and sentiments of being far away from home seeing the foreign soldiers as regular human beings (Koskinen-Koivisto 2016).

Despite overall positive impressions and comments many visitors also reported that the exhibition raised controversial feelings: "I was surprised by the photos that showed Finnish people celebrating with a Nazi flag on the table and greeting as Nazis – yack! [sic]". This rather shocked reaction to seeing a Nazi flag and the notorious salute being performed by Finns shows how this chapter of history, the Finnish-German alliance, is not only difficult and sensitive but also distant and foreign subject for some Finnish people. It has been argued elsewhere that Finns have tried to distance themselves from



Fig. 1: One of the photographs that could be activated through a dedicate mobile application to 'talk' to the visitor. Photo: Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto, 2015

the German war efforts and ideology ever since the war (Herva 2014, 300). A multivocal approach to WWII history is thus not an easy goal for a museum exhibition to aspire to.

The contradictory feelings were also related to the lack of information about the tragedy that followed the German co-belligerent presence in Lapland: "I kind of longed for the sense of drama that happened after this friendship..." The dramatic events this respondent refers to are related to the Lapland War and major destruction that it caused for the township of Rovaniemi and the rest of Lapland. The *Wir waren Freunde* exhibition concentrated on the times of friendly relationship and the events and consequences of Lapland War are represented in the museums as part of the permanent exhibition *Northern Ways of Life* that among its exhibits includes two dioramas of the city of Rovaniemi, one from 1939 before WWII began, and the other right



Fig. 2: Detail of the section of the exhibition dealing with the romance between Liisa and Sigi.  
Photo: Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto, 2015

after the “burning of Lapland” in 1944, where most of the dwellings, leaving only chimneys stand in the landscape (see also Sivula and Siro 2015 for deeper discussion of the significance and history of these two town scale models).

Only nine respondents in total had experienced the exhibition as evoking mainly negative feelings. All these were foreign (non-Finnish) visitors, representing different European countries. The critical voices pointed to lack of information of the darker side of history, and of excluding totally the time before and after the alliance:

In general, I miss the critical approach to this topic. It seems that the decision of Finland to incorporate with the nazis is seen in a positive way. It's also negative that the exhibition completely ignores the time before and after this time-span. Was it OK to cooperate with the Nazis?? Good friendship?



How close, sympathetic local people were with Nazis, 21,000 SS-soldiers...  
Painting a too romantic picture. Erika-march in the beginning echoes evil.

Some of the critics also mentioned an overall broad and “superficial” focus and the lack of historical facts and evidence about the destruction and genocide caused by the Nazis. Among the most critical voices there are some visitors whose family members died in the hands of Nazis, and it is understandable that their reactions to the exhibition are thus strong:

Extremely cursory display + broad information about the war and nazis overall.

To show the fate of those who were victims of this friendship. To focus on WWII history without describing Nazi-Germany as a state of war criminals. Surprised how such an exhibition could be presented, the tendency exhibited here would be impossible in Germany or Austria!

The last remark about how this kind of exhibition could not be produced elsewhere, is most probably accurate, and explains the surprising effect that it had. It is important to note that the museum staff members working on the exhibition were aware of the dispute that *Wir waren Freunde* might cause among international audiences (as indicated to us during interviews during and after the exhibition’s display). They planned the exhibition to take place outside of the major winter tourism season of Lapland when there are higher numbers of international tourists in the region, and it was taken down before the end of January, a time of year when traditionally many Israeli tourist groups arrive in Finnish Lapland.

The favourite aspects that around a third (33.4%) of visitors that answered this question mentioned was the variety and quality of objects and photos represented in the exhibition. The exhibition introduced a wide selection of unpublished photographic material from the museum’s own archives. In addition, several families, both Finnish and German, had sent their family albums and individual photos to the museum. In addition, some of the photos of the exhibition were made alive through a mobile application. The application clearly appealed to younger audience (fig. 1, p. 160).

Most respondents, as we noted earlier, found it positive that the exhibition touched upon the everyday life of ordinary citizens and their daily encounters under WWII. Many answers to the survey highlighted that personal stories and materials such as “authentic letters and diary entries” were

of particular interest to them. Maaria Linko (1998) has pointed out that through visiting museums and exhibitions with emotional experiences and involve thought-provoking elements, people can enhance their knowledge about collective history and memory, and revive their own memories and family histories. In Linko's opinion, the personal elements and examples of individual lives of real people are crucial for evoking interest in history. In this light it is not a surprise that a high minority of 38% of respondents that answered the question listed as their favourite part of the exhibition the section that included the authentic letters of a Finnish Woman named 'Liisa' and a German soldier named 'Sigi', that illuminated an intimate love story (fig. 2, p. 161).

Interestingly, researchers who have studied the legacy of WWII and especially the Lapland War in Finland through popular culture, such as books and films, argue that one of the key themes that is revisited the Finnish-German relationships especially with regards to the role of women and their sexuality (see e.g. Säaskilahti 2015; Hiltunen and Säaskilahti 2017). These relationships were considered shameful and Finnish women who had encounters with German soldiers were accused of loose sexual morals. Although addressed in popular culture, at the level of collective and personal history, these relationships were a taboo issue for a long time, until very recently (see Väyrynen 2014). In the light of these accusations and silencing of women's experiences, the representation of Liisa's and Sigi's love story in the *Wir waren Freunde* exhibition can be considered as an act of breaking a taboo. The fact that Liisa's descendants had gifted the museum her mementoes and the series of letters and photos.

## Conclusions

The respondents of the survey who had answered to open questions and added more detailed comments about how they felt about the exhibition in general seemed to be pleased with the approach that was taken in the exhibition to the wartime. The respondents seemed to be aware of the role of museums and individual exhibitions in representing history from a chosen perspective, and some respondents expected that the exhibition would have addressed also other prior events and consequences of Finnish-German alliance.

In general, although gleaning controversy for other reasons (see e.g. Koskinen-Koivisto and Thomas 2017 for discussion of the debates generated around the promotional match boxes produced to advertise *Wir waren Freunde*), the exhibition itself seems to have been for the most part positively received. This could be in part due to its status as inherently local history that local people felt was important to discuss and no longer to keep silent about, in addition to the universal experience of WWII, to which most visitors can relate even if the period falls outside of their own lifespan.

The longer term legacy of the exhibition is at yet unknown; at the time of writing there are no plans to tour the exhibition to other locations, and its status as a temporary display means that over time it will itself become a thing of memory. However, in many ways it has indeed broken taboos within Finland and it will be interesting to see if future exhibitions – temporary or permanent – follow suit.

### Acknowledgements

This article is a part of the research project *Lapland's Dark Heritage: Understanding the Cultural Legacy of Northern Finland's WWII. German Materialities within Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, funded by the Academy of Finland (Decision no. 275497); available at: <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/lapland-dark-heritage>.

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