



Heritage out of Control: (B)Lasting Bombs

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On January 30, 2021, more than 8000 inhabitants of Göttingen, Germany, had to evacuate their homes. Four suspected WWII bombs had been detected underground, and in order to proceed with whatever building construction had been the cause of the find, these objects had to be freed up and detonated by specialists for the removal of warfare materials. Early on Jan. 31, the four bombs of 500 kilograms each were then successfully detonated. Eleven years prior and not far from the 2021 location, three bomb defusion experts died and two others



were severely wounded, when a similar bomb exploded prematurely, while the crew was working on preparing the detonation.

In military parlance, such entities are collectively referred to as “unexploded ordnances” (e.g. Byrnes 2008). They occupy large groups of scholars concerned with the detection of “bulk explosives” supported by the NATO Science Programme (e.g. Schubert and Kuznetsov 2002, 2003), while anthropologists increasingly turn to military waste as a long-term transformative agent for life and land (Henig 2019; Reno 2019). Finding them is a frequent experience in Germany - and many other territories involved in past and present wars. Their presence is known in principle, though the longer the timespan since a given war, the vaguer this knowledge grows. The Göttingen event of January 2021 was even relatively small compared to 2017 events in Hanover with 50,000 and Frankfurt with more than 60,000 evacuees during the disarming of bombs. Leftover weapons of (mass) destruction are an overwhelmingly present heritage of humanity, a dark accomplishment for which many nations could jointly write a heritage application dossier. Ever more sophisticated knowledge and skill combine in this tradition of the will to annihilate and the defensive counter-aggression it generates. Yet each war is unique, its duration generally unforeseeable, and its detritus literally out of control, reaching into subsequent peace times in an indeterminate future (Hening 2019:88-9).

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Often buried deep in the ground or lying at the bottom of lakes and coastal waters, these bombs constitute the waste of war. They are, unmistakably, a left-over of confrontations, of a (more or less) collective will to destroy. While war memorials and certified [dark heritage sites](#) such as concentration camps (Feldman 2010) offer clearly delineated places and times of remembrance and repenting, aging and unexploded bombs are unpredictable and force themselves disruptively into everyday life. As complex yet - up to a given point in time -



hidden objects, they are not part of collective memorial activity and heritage preservation. “Unlike other material reminders” of a war, military waste generally does not “become part of a grand collective narrative” (Henig 2012:23). It is precisely this blind spot in remembrance activity that renders military waste – among all the wastes that humankind produces (Reno 2015) – most endangering. Unexploded ordnances, as non-included entities and events, are then a good point of departure for examining the logics of the heritage and public memorial categories, and to explore the everyday rationality (Zani 2018), the eerie absence/presence, as well as the moral ambiguity that sits in what is overlooked for heritage-value. With the Hague Convention of 1954, international measures have been successively articulated to protect cultural property in the context of armed conflict, and to act against their illicit trafficking. Within UNESCO, these measures are intricately linked to the growth of heritage valorization and the formation of heritage canons. But the clean-up after armed conflict, a clear and present danger to cultural property as well as all life forms, remains in limbo, not just because military waste often remains invisible but also because the responsibility for its removal falls ultimately to those who inhabit the terrain, perhaps with international support. Discursively circulating questions of guilt and retribution do little to tackle the task of locating and diffusing the unexploded bombs (Henig 2012).

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One of the key elements of establishing value regimes such as constituted by UNESCO’s numerous heritage conventions are the “operational guidelines”. They serve to legitimize not just the bureaucratic procedures through which a site or a cultural practice may achieve heritage status, but they also offer guidance on how the heritage conventions are to be interpreted so as to arrive at characteristics that legitimate their heritage value (cf. Bendix 2018: 96-195). UNESCO’s many selection bodies are continuously engaged in adjusting their operational guidelines in order to offer firm parameters for nominating and selecting heritage



sites and practices. In so doing, a standard can be set for, e.g., outstanding qualities, rareness, importance vis-à-vis others of similar quality, historical positionality, and so forth. The guidelines ensure that heritage value is bestowed only on the mutually agreed upon best examples to the exclusion of the rest (Groth 2012; Hafstein 2018; Brumann 2021). Similarly, events commemorating battles, revolutions, independence, etc., are arrived at through dynamic processes of negotiation within a given polity which in effect control which victory and loss or which transformative event is to be added to the “archive of the future” (cf. Appadurai 2003). Against this backdrop, let us look at what is so unworthy about ordnances waiting to explode and landmines waiting to be stepped on, decades after a peace treaty was signed, so that they are not entering this circuit.

Unexploded weapons certainly are powerful evidence of human pasts. They can be labelled authentic – one of the heavily debated hallmark categories of heritage designations – in as much as they are unique in their assembly of weaponry craftsmanship of the 1940s; indeed, the knowledge surrounding their composition and mechanics is somewhat endangered. Yet with their potential for independent agency, they constitute “heritage out of control” for multiple reasons. To begin with, they did not detonate at the time they were supposed to – veering away from the purpose and occasion for which they were built, extracting themselves from the temporal confines of the war, and becoming, so to speak, entities “missing without action”. Any time after their launch and unexploded existence, they are materially and ideologically embodying Ernst Bloch’s much cited “contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous” (1962 [1935]). Materially volatile, they may shape-shift before a team of experts can schedule a protocol for controlled explosion. Their agency or rather the agency of their constituent chemical parts points to loss of human control, the finite nature of expertise and, indeed, a number of potential human failures along the road to a given present, such as the one in January 2021 in Göttingen: failures in the construction of the bomb; failures in where and from what altitude it was dropped, leading to failed explosion; failure to find and defuse it right after it was dropped; failure to foresee what would happen to the combination of chemical matter over the course



of time, thus creating an ever bigger danger of spontaneous explosion; and failure to remember — or rather, the will to forget.

The list of unforeseen failures stands opposite to what there was at the beginning of these bombs' manufacture - and for that matter at the beginning of many instruments of mass destruction: excitement in the scientific development that calculated the power of exothermic reaction of explosive materials, pride in the skill of building a casing and a detonator that would then bring about an explosion at the right place and time. There is, in other words, a great deal of intangible knowledge as well as craftsmanship that - with all due awareness of the horror such devices would inflict - generated excitement and a sense of contributing to the common good. In all cases of weaponry development one can furthermore assume huge monetary investment in development and manufacture, as well as secrecy of the knowledge entailed which in turn is common also for many crafts honored as heritage. The ruins of military installations occasionally turn into dark tourism attractions or even museums (Reno 2019; e.g. Wielgus et al. 2017); weapons of mass destruction are preferably forgotten, once the purpose of their crafting has passed.

Returning to the present and the need to find and detonate WWII bombs resting underground, there is the scarcity of precisely that kind of bomb-building knowledge necessary for the diffusion of bomb waste: familiarity with the specifics of detonators built in the 1940s is hardly part of common knowledge - and could or perhaps should be designated particularly valuable intangible heritage (Bendix 2019:230). The patents associated with it may have expired, the very concreteness of its association with danger keeps it safely in the purview of conferences among NATO scientists and courses of training that likely engender secrecy: it is the kind of expertise that is associated with public and national safety - though by now undoubtedly also found in online sites outside and within the "darknet." It is an expertise which takes on ghostlike qualities, as the bundles of experience and knowledge vanishing with a practitioner weigh so heavily on the future (Ialenti 2020: 265).



Unexploded ordnance proves an interesting case of matter and knowledge outside rosters of heritage- and remembrance-making - which does not mean that one could or should not aspire to place them in that realm. The commonplace regularity with which they surface in German public life suggests, interestingly, that they are not considered ghouls of the past, but rather inconvenient - if generally carefully scheduled - disruptions of everyday life. They are at once too ordinary and too ambiguous to suit heritage-making practices. Given Germany's thick politics and practices of remembrance acknowledging collective guilt for WWI and especially WWII, finding dangerous waste of war and the necessary work and inconvenience going along with it, are largely grouped with the complex of guilt that explains the weapons' presence in the ground.

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Thus far, I am not aware of any concentrated effort to assemble and publicly archive the finds of unexploded ordnances. Their serendipitous but frequent finds and their defusing or blasting seems to be considered part of civilian infrastructure. Even as thousands of inhabitants have to spend nights in temporary shelters, sometimes more than once a year, the memory of these displacements neither accumulates nor finds reflection in archival dossiers. Rather, the defusing activities are experienced in the present moment - a sensation within the here and now. There is pride in the extant expertise which, again, is treated as an accomplishment of a well-organized state that will ensure a rapid return to everyday life. The ghosts and guilt of WWII appear to be firmly framed and hence "under control" elsewhere: in the days of remembrance on the calendar and the dark heritage sites from nearby labor camps turned museum (such as Moringen near Göttingen) to Buchenwald or Auschwitz. Indeed, the entire history curriculum in public schools has developed a mechanism of confronting and mastering particularly the fascist past, encoded in the omnipresent term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (dealing, or coming to terms, with the past). Yet on the backdrop of an age so keen to nominate for heritage status



even everyday talk (Bendix, forthcoming.), the “normalcy” or “naturalization” of the debris of war point to a failure in the heritage apparatus that turns a blind eye towards these uncontrollable creations of the human spirit. The knowledge and skill necessary for constructing weapons was and is generally harbored in secret, but at the very least the knowledge and skill to find and diffuse them ought to be celebrated universally. As such, the very out-of-control nature of unexploded wastes of war encapsulates the limits of human agency vis-à-vis certain kinds of destructive matter.

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