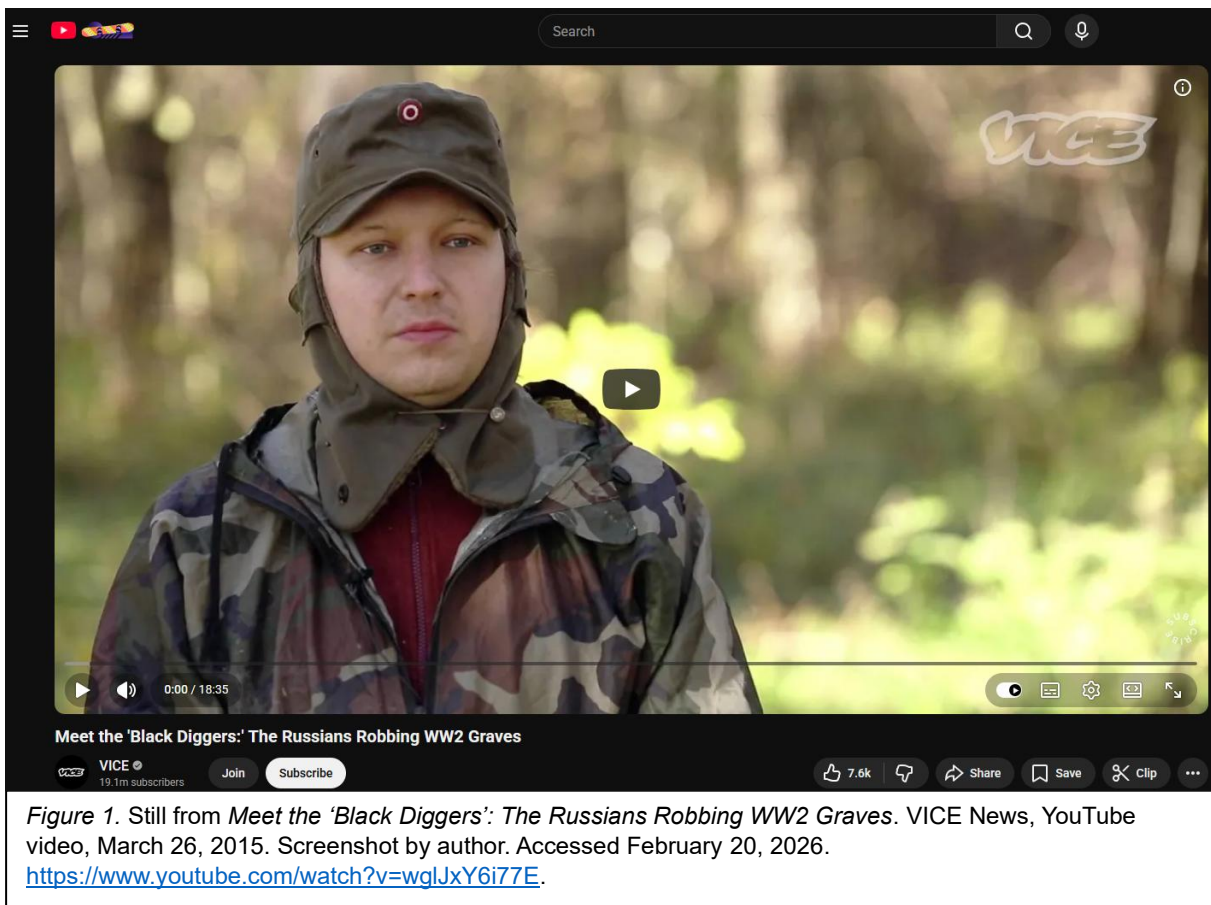


Video Review: Meet the 'Black Diggers': The Russians Robbing WW2 Graves

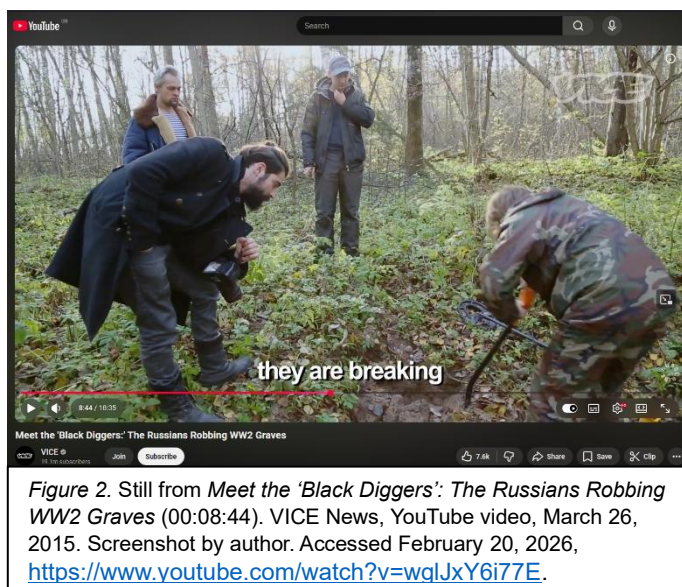


VICE's 18 minute mini-documentary *Meet the 'Black Diggers': The Russians Robbing WW2 Graves*, presented by a young bearded German journalist, investigates the informal excavations of Second World War battlefields east of Moscow. From the title onward, the film frames the subject through legal and moral transgression: "robbing WW2 graves", which pre-loads a narrative for the viewer as one associated with criminality and desecration. The title draws on the Russian vernacular term *чёрные копатели* ("black diggers"), which closely aligns to that which Hardy (2016) describes as "black archaeology" in Eastern Europe – illegal metal detecting and unlicensed excavation, often paired with illicit cultural property trade and weak enforcement regimes.¹ The use of this term immediately generates a narrative loaded with clandestine activities carried out under the cover of darkness with links to unlawful black markets before the viewer even encounters any contextual nuance. However, as the documentary unfolds, this initial title framing gradually comes into question

¹ Samuel Andrew Hardy, "'Black Archaeology' in Eastern Europe: Metal Detecting, Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Objects, and 'Legal Nihilism' in Belarus, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine," *Public Archaeology* 15, no. 4 (2016): 214–237, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14655187.2017.1410050>; "Чёрные копатели" [*Chyornye kopateli*], Wikipedia, accessed February 12, 2026, https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Чёрные_копатели.

as it becomes less accurate and tenable. The opening minute contains snippets of scenes and interviews, teasing different perspectives and events, which sets an exciting precedent for a balanced and truly investigative production.

What first begins as an exposé of grave robbing in Russia unwinds into a steady journey showing the complexity behind the motivations and the deeper meanings which are not obvious on a surface level. The journalist's tone initially appears investigative and sceptical, positioning the viewer within a scope of suspicion, thus establishing a moral trajectory which the unfolding narrative later complicates. As interviews unravel, the voices of the diggers begin to challenge the initial framing, as explanations of passion for the work, subcultural identity and desire to recover unnamed soldiers are revealed. Through the clever shifting of narrative cues, captivating cinematography and sound design, it can be said that this short film demonstrates how media representation can quickly construct or influence viewers' ethical judgement. The camera appropriately lingers longer during these exchanges, which allows a degree of intimacy and reflection to absorb and ponder the words or perspective being offered. This technique subtly humanises the interviewees and participants of the documentary, shifting their character away from earlier preconceptions of shadowy figures operating in black markets. This transition exposes the constructed nature of the documentary's opening moral certainty, which from this perspective, exemplifies how media representation can actively assemble and then destabilise said ethical judgement, especially when it comes to controversial and sensitive issues surrounding battlefield recovery and conflict archaeology.



This piece presents a nuanced dialogue throughout, which generates feelings that oscillate between condemnation and endorsement of the activities being carried out, actively guiding external audiences to grasp the complexity of the bureaucracy, morality, politics and social meaning surrounding some post-war contexts. The narrative construction is reinforced not only through language, but aesthetic

strategy: digging scenes in the forest with subdued colour grading and minimal musical backing transports the spectator into the woodland setting, where a slight sense of unease can be felt (see Figure 2). The contrasting soundtrack in other parts of the film presents

upbeat Slavic music during clips of cultural interaction and travel, which arguably adds an element of excitement and variation to the piece, elevating the mood and keeping the viewer engaged. The landscapes of the Eastern Front depicted in the video might be translated well through Logan and Reeves's (2009) discussion of "places of pain and shame" – whereby sites associated with trauma, loss, or contested memory require ongoing negotiation over how they are interpreted and represented.² To the credit of the video, these particular forests are not simply presented as physical terrain, but are instead displayed sensitively by the videographer as morally charged spaces containing unresolved histories. Furthermore, switching between sombre excavation scenes and culturally vibrant social encounters is a realistic reflection of the tension held between commemoration and everyday life for those living in post-war contexts.

This documentary appears to be aimed towards a larger global audience, rather than a niche academic or specialist type of viewership. The video is somewhat digestible since it runs for only 18:35 minutes with little expectation of prior knowledge relating to the Eastern front, post-war recovery, or heritage legislation, as conveyed through the brief explanatory segments alongside a clear emphasis on immersive experience. Despite only being accessible via VICE's channel on YouTube, this arguably works well – since as Ofcom's 2025 *Online Nation* study shows that YouTube is used by 94% of adults.³ One hindrance with this medium of production is that credits and information regarding those involved in the creation of the video is limited. There is no trace of cast, crew, directors, interviewees or references, which I would contest certainly undermines the credibility of this mini documentary. Additionally, there is a large engagement with cultural aspects – such as the sharing of vodka with new-found Russian friends or the surprise visit to family-friendly WWII reenactment festival – which provides a multilayered perspective grounded in the lifestyles of the people who engage in the excavations (see Figures 3 and 4). The absence of professional archaeologists or other academic voices is certainly notable, with the authority being largely mediated through the journalist – whose expressions, language, and reactions guide observer interpretation. Schofield (2009) asserts that conflict archaeology requires a heightened level of ethical sensitivity and awareness of the living memory contexts, which is

² William Logan and Keir Reeves, "Introduction: Remembering Places of Pain and Shame," in *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with 'Difficult Heritage'*, ed. William Logan and Keir Reeves (London: Routledge, 2009), 1–3.

³ Ofcom, *Online Nation Report 2025*, December 10, 2025, 4, <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/online-research/online-nation/2025/online-nations-report-2025.pdf?v=409837>.

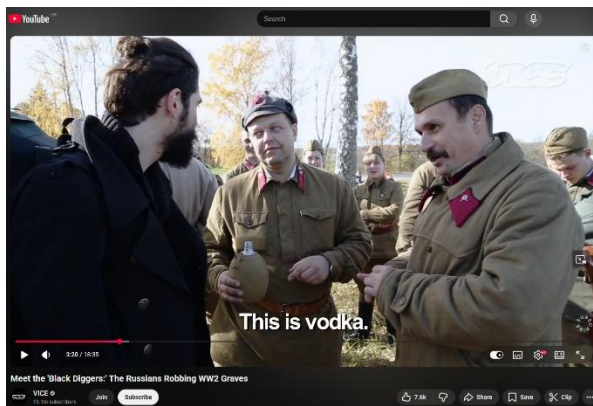


Figure 3. Still from *Meet the 'Black Diggers': The Russians Robbing WW2 Graves* (00:03:20). VICE News, YouTube video, March 26, 2015. Screenshot by author. Accessed February 20, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wglJxY6i77E>.



Figure 4. Still from *Meet the 'Black Diggers': The Russians Robbing WW2 Graves* (00:03:39). VICE News, YouTube video, March 26, 2015. Screenshot by author. Accessed February 20, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wglJxY6i77E>.

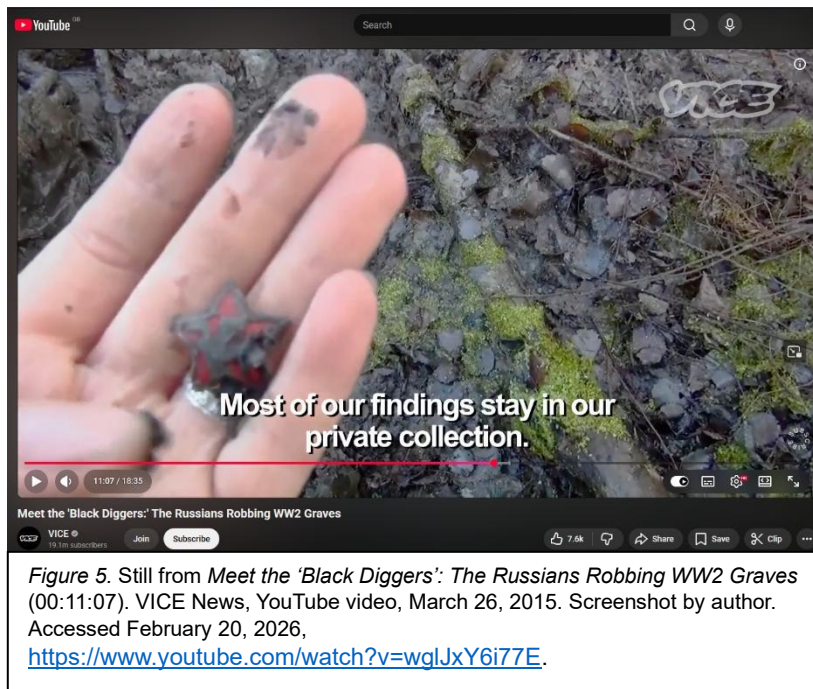
arguably present in this documentary from the apparently sympathetic words of the excavators.⁴ Despite this redeeming factor, it could be said the production lacks consideration towards the bigger picture surrounding battlefield recovery and requires more discussion regarding the “official” forensic recovery groups and volunteer search organizations, which increasingly operate in similar contexts. In spite of the introduction of stricter heritage legislation in Russia – including the 2013 Federal Law No. 245-FZ and amendments to Federal Law No. 73-FZ “On Cultural Heritage Sites” which restrict metal detecting and punish unlicensed excavation with harsher penalties – illicit activity exists.⁵ This legal framework further complicates the documentary’s moral framing, and by viewing *Meet the 'Black Diggers'* through the lens of Hardy’s (2016) work, terms like “legal nihilism” become more understandable when certain actions taken by casual excavators emerge as more justifiable and some laws in place seem less suitable.⁶

One further element in the production of this video that is worth considering, is the visual treatment of the artefacts and bodies of the deceased. The close-up shots of recovered military equipment, weapon fragments and human remains emerging from the damp soil give these finds a type of cinematic prominence, which certainly risks aestheticizing or

⁴ John Schofield, *Aftermath: Readings in the Archaeology of Recent Conflict* (New York: Springer, 2009), 15–20, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-88521-6>.

⁵ Federal Law No. 73-FZ, “On Objects of Cultural Heritage (Historical and Cultural Monuments) of the Peoples of the Russian Federation,” adopted June 25, 2002, as amended, accessed February 12, 2026, https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_37318/; Federal Law No. 245-FZ, “On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation in Connection with the Suppression of Illegal Activity in the Field of Archaeology,” adopted July 23, 2013, accessed February 12, 2026, https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_149696/.

⁶ Hardy, “‘Black Archaeology’ in Eastern Europe,” 214–217.



possibly fetishising discovery (see Figure 5). Even whilst the documentary outwardly critiques the illicit circulation of such material, it simultaneously provides a visual platform for the items to be viewed and fetishised, which could be said to be rather hypocritical. However, these items should not just be thought of as illicit commodities,

since Saunders (2000) demonstrates, that such objects from conflict become desirable to people as “objectifications of grief” and mediators between memory, identity and landscape.⁷ Although some of the diggers insist that their motivations are not financial (the journalist even states they spend more money than it makes for them), the visual grammar of the film still effectively conveys these artefacts as spectacle. In this sense, the video arguably participates in the very material fascination which it apparently seeks to interrogate.

Ultimately, the video *Meet the 'Black Diggers'* carefully demonstrates the nature of some battlefield landscapes, by showing that they are not simply static memorials, but dynamic arenas where legality, identity, memory and market forces all intersect with one another. By constructing and then complicating the initial moral framing by offering oscillating nuance, this short video presents a unique manner of narrative construction for viewers. It offers a sensitive, and conscientious medium to help observers understand some of the complexities of conflict archaeology, whilst remaining accessible to various audiences.

⁷ Nicholas J. Saunders, “Bodies of Metal, Shells of Memory: ‘Trench Art’, and the Great War Re-cycled,” *Journal of Material Culture* 5, no. 1 (2000): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/135918350000500103>.

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Figure 2. Still from *Meet the 'Black Diggers': The Russians Robbing WW2 Graves* (00:08:44). VICE News, YouTube video, March 26, 2015. Screenshot by author. Accessed February 20, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wglJxY6i77E>.

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Figure 5. Still from *Meet the 'Black Diggers': The Russians Robbing WW2 Graves* (00:11:07). VICE News, YouTube video, March 26, 2015. Screenshot by author. Accessed February 20, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wglJxY6i77E>.