

Archaeology of Conflict: motivators for battlefield collectors and the ideologies behind conflict recovery and restoration.

Introduction

Conflict archaeology has become a dynamic and multi-disciplinary area of historical engagement with conflicts of the past. (Scotts & McFeaters, 2010, pp. 103)

In modern engagements with sites of conflict, there are various technological and theoretical frameworks to apply to analyse both modern and pre-historic landscapes, assemblages and organic remains (Sutherland & Holst, 2005, pp. 2). Sites of conflict can reveal extended contextual information about materiality, individuals who fought, died, in addition to developing a wider socio-political and cultural context(s) (Shackle, 2003, pp. 3)

However, despite academic involvement there are many external and amateur groups that seek to recover a range of battlefield materials, memorabilia and organic remains, these groups known as 'black archaeologists' (illegal) and white diggers (legal). The ideologies (Thomas, 2014) behind such excavation can be as varied as the individuals who extract such assemblages, example of such motivators include:

-Monetary gain -Criminal enterprises -Emotional Connection -Historical Value -Materiality -Morality -Reconstruction -Academic -Fetishization -Restoration -Extremist Ideologies -Hobby

Black Archaeologist Motivation(s)

Black Diggers often possess a range of motivations, primarily focused on joint financial gain (Williamson, 2018) of securing rare or sought after assemblages to then sell to a collector(s). Artefacts relate to specific battlefields, conflicts or histories of violence. With popular conflicts focusing on WW1, WW2- and in particular the Eastern European front, in which much was left undisturbed post war and since the fall of the USSR. (Losh, 2017)

Monetary pursuit has lead to links between many black archaeologists and criminal underworlds (Hardy, 2020, 219-20), in which they exploit, metal detecting, drones, and geo-physical data to find sites of monetary interest.



Fig. 2 – (above) – (Terentiev, 2015). Russian 'grave diggers' collecting Scythian burial materials, looted artefacts are transported to wealthier foreign markets despite illegal exportation of domestic artefacts in Russia.



Fig. 3 – (above) – (Losh, 2017). Polish unregistered metal-detectorists finds. Remains of the fallen are often discarded in favour of 'valuable goods' which many have likened to 'grave robbing' (Hardy, 2020, pp. 223-4) Notably present are; ammunition and firearms. These firearms and ammunition if unregistered and restored, posses great value to criminal enterprises for which they can be used as untraceable 'ghost guns', which increases the demand for the recovery of battlefield memorabilia and an surge in 'treasure hunters' (Hodge, 2022)(Walker, 1984, pp. 430-2).

Ideological Variation – White Diggers

White diggers represent a ideological antithesis to the black diggers, many white digger groups seek to aid in the recovery, reburial and identification of fallen soldiers, connecting to emotional, historical and often academic contexts of sites of conflict (Ashbridge & Verdegem, 2020, pp. 2-4).

White diggers are not without controversy, many are untrained amateurs, who possess ill-directed morality or fetishization (Monnin, 2020, pp. 4-5) of the past.

Believing they are helping, can do more damage or leave sites barren, unrecorded with unsustainable excavation techniques. Furthermore, some use this as a disguised ideology to retrieve the same valuable material's black archaeologist seek (Sietsonen et al, 2014, pp. 3-5)



Fig. 4 – (Above) – (ThePipeLine, 2016) The controversial show Battlefield Recovery, formally Nazi War Diggers. Reveals ideologies of both 'White' and 'Black' diggers in which they seek valuable materiality, but were criticized for their public disrespect of soldiers remains (Altschul et al, 2014, pp. 1-2)

Collecting culture

Many collectors understand the inherent 'entrancement' by material culture and seek to possess materials as 'prizes' to be hoarded, (Sawaged, 1999, pp. 83-4).

Collectors idealisation of the physicality of owning material has lead to many assemblages being removed both from context and spatial association, leaving their context and history removed both from the war and the accessibility of a public archaeological record.

Online Demand - Exploitation

White and Black Diggers possess a strong online presence, the re-selling of material assemblages, ranging from weapons, medals, to jewellery has become very popular amongst collectors, academics, and even neo-Nazi extremists. These black digger listed items, exploit both collective memories of wartime events through disassociated spaces and materials, and indirectly promote the market for battlefield grave robbing, promoting a cultivation of a 'dark' or 'difficult' heritage rooted in negative and painful memories for many associated (Sietsonen et al, 2014, pp. 11-12)



Ring with initials / from Stalingrad



German ring with skull / from Stalingrad

Fig. 5 – (Above) – (StalingradFront.com, 2022) An active listing from a relic recovery website, in which they attest to be authenticated wedding band and Nazi officer's ring of Wehrmacht soldiers that died in the siege of Stalingrad.

Discussion: Damaged and altered heritage

The removal of many artefacts from their place of material 'slumber, without detailing or contextualising spatial loci, organic remains and geographical conditions damages the authenticity and value as a object of conflicted heritage such objects possess. It disturbs, disrespects and malforms cultural layers that may have been also buried in earth (Zhurbin & Borisov, 2016, 220-1).

However, the recovery of the fallen soldiers by many of the white and ethically minded diggers is a moral I contribution to heritage and can help positively alter processes of bereavement and closure with the living families of the fallen soldier. Positively transforming landscapes and local identities (Ash, 2014) , to commemorate their lost and fallen.



Fig. 6 –(Left) – (Ash. 2014) The recovered bodies of soviet soldiers outside St. Petersburg, being laid to rest in a public ceremony with soviet general's honours.

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