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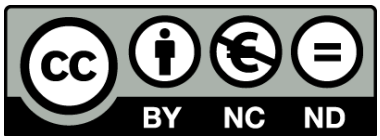

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When Heritage Goes to War – A Response to Cornelius Holtorf

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Before I begin, I would like to thank Cornelius Holtorf for a timely and thought-provoking article and the kind opportunity offered me to provide a response to it. I agree with Holtorf that the 'flesh and blood' rhetoric in Sweden is truly unsettling given the dark historical parallels and agree that there is a need for a heritage to deprioritise nationalistic rhetoric and work to promote a 'culture of peace'.

However, while Holtorf is suited to talk about the context of Sweden, I found myself at odds with his understanding of the major backdrop to his argument – Russia's[1] ongoing invasion of Ukraine and the role heritage has played in justifying and resisting Russia's genocidal violence.[2] I lay out my disagreement in three parts: first, I situate myself, as I think positionality is key for understanding some of the disagreements that might arise with relation to Russia; second, I return to some of the shared and unshared heritage that has been used by Russia and Ukraine in the war – which, should be stated, already started back in 2014 with Crimea and Donbas; and third, I touch upon "the minds of humans" who, in Holtorf's words (2026: 30), are there to bring peace. After addressing these in turn, I bring the discussion closer to my current home and the work that I do at the Svalbard Museum in Longyearbyen, Norway. I argue that instead of being preoccupied with the future values of heritage, we, as archaeologists and heritage practitioners, should return to the past – that traditional strength of our discipline that can denaturalize the harmful narratives that threaten peace, democracy, and the sanctity of human life.

A Heritage I Do Not Wish to Have

I was born in Latvia to Russian-speaking parents in the final years of the USSR. Ancestry of both of my grandmothers goes back to historic Russian-speaking Old Believer communities – one in eastern Latvia and the other in northern Ukraine. Both of my grandfathers were born in Russia (though one was partially of Ashkenazi Jewish descent). As such, I am a product of the Russian empire – both the Tsarist and the Soviet one – and a large part of

1 A note on toponomy – As my response deals with how the past has been used largely in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, I was originally hesitant to use the word 'Russia' at all. It is a loaded toponym. I contemplated instead using the 'Russian Federation', the officially recognized name of the country, or even 'Muscovy' as has sometimes been done by Ukrainian commentators on the conflict. The name 'Russia' goes back to a Viking Age kingdom centred around Kyiv at a time long before Moscow even existed (Mick 2023: 136–139). It was only under the expansionist Tsars of Muscovy in the 18th century that the name 'Russia' was resurrected from the early Slavic chronicles to give legitimacy to what was essentially a predatory, tribute-taking successor state of the Mongol Empire (Weiner 2009). However, for ease of reading and comprehensibility to an international audience, I decided to stick with the name 'Russia' instead.

2 We should also acknowledge that Ukraine is not the only place where wanton destruction of heritage and people is occurring in the world today – the events we see happening in Gaza and the West Bank being even more grotesque examples. We can also draw historic and contemporary parallels to Indigenous peoples' struggles against colonial destruction of heritage and forced assimilation in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Australia. However, for the purposes of this discussion I will focus on Ukraine, a topic that serves as a backdrop to Holtorf's argument and one that I feel most closely affected by.

my identity has been shaped by being a living remnant of empire from a post-imperial state. I also share a mother tongue with the aggressor state in the contemporary European war in question as well as many of the refugees who fled from eastern Ukraine. I didn't realize this before the start of the conflict, but the cries of anguish hit a lot deeper when they are spoken in your own mother tongue.

While the events that followed February 24, 2022 sent shockwaves around Europe, they have been most strongly felt by those living closest to the war. I myself was in Kirkenes, Norway's single border town to Russia, when the invasion started, and I spent the first days checking in with friends, family, and colleagues from eastern and east-central Europe. Through those conversations and in juxtaposition with the less embodied responses of my friends in western Europe and North America, I came to discover a shared heritage for everyone born east of Berlin – the twentieth century brought Russian tanks to the streets of our cities.

For my part, I was too young to remember the last time that Russian tanks rolled into Riga to crush the peaceful protests for Latvia's independence, but my mom walked 10 kilometres from work on those January nights while the power was out throughout the city. The previous times Russian tanks were on the streets of Latvia was in 1940 and then 1944/45, after which it took 46 years for them to leave. This prolonged occupation has left another kind of past shared by those east of the former Iron Curtain – a form of 'unruly' heritage of socialist infrastructure and ubiquitous mass-produced housing (Lahusen 2006; Meuser and Zadorin 2015; Olsen and Vinogradova 2019). So, when I see images of the streets of Mariupol, Bucha, and Bakhmut they do not look different from the Soviet *microraion* in which I formed my first childhood memories.

This is a heritage – familial, linguistic, historical, and unruly – that I and perhaps many people in Eastern Europe do not wish that we shared in this current moment. Yet it is involuntary, ubiquitous, and continuously reminds us of twentieth century traumas on a nearly daily basis. Thus, while defence spending has grown – as Holtorf rightly points out – by per capita GDP it has been highest in those countries that share a heritage of Russian occupation. This shared heritage facilitates a shared and collective response. Therefore, I am far less optimistic than Holtorf that heritage can build international solidarity across difference. In some cases, a shared heritage can help strengthen international solidarity in the face of a revanchist foe.

The (Un)sharing of Heritage

Just as a shared heritage can lead to international solidarity, assertions of a common past can be employed to erase difference and create justifications for violent assimilation and war (Kasianov 2025). This is no better exemplified than by Vladimir Putin who, on July 12, 2021, published what has been widely decried by academics as piece of pseudohistory – an article titled *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians* (Putin 2021[3]; for discussions see Kolstø 2023; Mick 2023; Kuzio 2024). The article, among other things, resurrected the old Tsarist denial of the existence of Ukrainians as a distinct people with their own distinct language, history, culture, and traditions while decrying Ukrainian statehood as a Bolshevik invention. Historical unity and national brotherhood harkened to the 'brotherly peoples' rhetoric used by the Soviet Union to justify Russia's control over them (Kolstø 2023).

Seven months after the publication of Putin's article, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine seeking to topple its democratically elected government and install a Kremlin-friendly regime. Ukraine resisted and fought back with tenacity that surprised the whole world. From everything that followed – looting, targeting, and destroying Ukraine's cultural institutions,[4] Russifying Ukrainian schools,[5] and forcefully deporting Ukrainian

3 I never thought I would cite Vladimir Putin, but here we are.

4 515 as of January 7, 2026. See https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/damaged-cultural-sites-ukraine-verified-unesco (16.01.2026).

5 https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/06/20/education-under-occupation/forced-russification-school-system-occupied-ukrainian (16.01.2026).

children[6] – we can see a crude and transparent attempt by Russia to try and erase a distinct Ukrainian identity as a way to crush not just the Ukrainian state but Ukrainian identity as whole. The value of heritage, therefore, goes beyond the notions of land, soil, or borders – concepts of territoriality that seem to preoccupy Holtorf in his article – but rather centres on the idea that distinct groups of peoples exist and have distinct histories and cultures that make them unique from their neighbours.

In the face of this assimilationist and imperialist war of aggression, it is a false and unfair equivocation for Holtorf to say that "both sides" (Ukraine and Russia) are using cultural heritage "to strengthen morale by reinforcing a strong sense of national identity" (Holtorf 2026: 28). While memory politics is at play by both sides, one side is attempting to assert a sovereign identity while the other is attempting to erase it. Therefore, the pursuit of difference through heritage is not necessarily groundwork for 'tribal identities' and violent conflict. Quite the contrary – violent conflict came first through the erasure of difference and then heritage was asserted to reinstate a distinctiveness that is threatened with being erased.

In his article, Holtorf brings up the example of the Historic Centre of Odesa being designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site in the middle of the war to illustrate how heritage can "[increase] conflicts between peoples and nations" (Holtorf 2026: 29). While I don't see how this conflict was increased when it already reached the point of invasion, I find Odesa to be a rather strange example to begin with. It carries the dubious imperial history of being founded by Catherine the Great. This fact has since been used by Putin and his ministers to repeatedly assert that Odesa is 'a Russian city' and part of 'Novorossiya' ('New Russia') thereby justifying its hypothetical future conquest.[7]

A better illustration for the roles that heritage can play in war, I would argue, may be found in borscht – a Ukrainian beetroot soup whose culture and cooking were inscribed in the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2022.[8] While most eastern European countries make a form of beet soup – spread in part due to empire – the earliest written mentions of it come from Ukraine where it maintains a broad range of regional culinary diversity along with traditions, expressions, family names, and geographical toponyms related to the making of borscht. Its inscription into the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage specifically references Russia's genocidal invasion, the murder and dislocation of people, cessation of traditional agriculture, loss of natural and agricultural spaces, and contamination of water sources that threaten the decontextualization and cessation of Ukraine's national dish (Klopotenko 2022: 6–7). As such, I do not see UNESCO as being somehow 'complicit in war' as much as enabling Ukrainians to defend themselves as a people with a culture and heritage that is distinct from their aggressor. If Russia's invasion is to physically and ideologically fail, borscht and other Ukrainian heritage need to be unshared as uniquely distinct from their neighbours.

The Lives of Humans

Holtorf ends his article with an appeal for a heritage that is there to serve the lives of humans whose minds can thereby defend peace. However, he is rather vague on who these hypothetical humans are for whom heritage can serve as an inspiration for future peacebuilding.

So, let us be concrete about the lives of humans who find themselves in Ukraine – *Russia is committing a genocide*. The whole world saw this four years ago in Bucha and Mariupol, and we see it now in the nightly attacks

6 The true scope of this is hard to assess. According to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe there have been about 20,000 cases confirmed by Ukraine, while some sources put the estimates as high as 700,000. See https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/ad-hoc-committees-and-working-groups/parliamentary-support-team-for-ukraine/5294-russian-abductions-and-deportations-of-ukrainian-children-by-carina-oedebrink-eng/file (16.01.2026).

7 https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/01/11/putin-says-ukraines-odesa-is-historically-russian-reality-is-more-complicated-a83612 (16.01.2026).

8 https://ich.unesco.org/en/USL/culture-of-ukrainian-borscht-cooking-01852 (16.01.2026).

on civilian housing and infrastructure,[9] systematic murder and torture of Ukrainian civilians and POWs,[10] forced 'passportisation' of Ukrainians,[11] the settlement of Russians into occupied territories,[12] theft and destruction of Ukrainian heritage and cultural objects, and the cynical deportation of Ukrainian children. Given these conditions, the future of Ukraine, its heritage, and – especially – the prospects of its future generations are being violently brutalized.

Ukraine is fighting a post-colonial struggle against an imperialist oppressor – one that has historically sought to suppress and subsume Ukrainian identity from forced subservience and Tsarist decrees to the Executed Renaissance and the Holodomor.[13] Thus, when we talk about a cultural heritage that "is about caring primarily for the lives of living people" (Holtorf 2026: 8), the protection of meaningful objects, sites, rituals, and traditions from directed and premeditated destruction is inseparable from the protection of humans and their right to exist. There is a huge difference between the disintegration of a farmstead, a lighthouse, or a factory due to neglect, abandonment, or climate change (for example Pétursdóttir 2014; DeSilvey 2017; Venovcevs 2025), and purposeful obliteration of a family home, a national language, and the monuments to which groups of people attach social meaning and belonging. As much as I love and respect the work put into heritage futures by Holtorf and the other scholars he cites in his article, one cannot shrug off genocide as "an ability to accept and embrace transformation" (Holtorf 2026: 31).

Finally, I do not see war in Europe as a hypothetical future. War is the present. Not just in Ukraine but in much of the rest of Europe. Russia's drones, missiles, and military aircraft have already crossed into the EU's/NATO's borders,[14] civilian infrastructure has been sabotaged by 'unknown parties', GPS jamming has become routine,[15] and informational operations – sometimes using fallacious historic parallels – have become increasingly common (Ahonen et al. 2023; Shekhovtsov 2023; Myklebost et al. 2025a). This is not a war in a traditional sense but a hybrid conflict that Russia has become increasingly proficient in, meant to destabilize its perceived and potential enemies – including the affluent, stable European democracies. Thus, just like for the people in Ukraine, war is an involuntary present condition and one that cannot be solved until there is a just and long-lasting peace for Ukraine and a democratically minded government in the Kremlin. Until then, the task of heritage in the present is a lot loftier than the 'futures literacy' Holtorf is calling for – luckily, it is one that archaeologists and heritage practitioners are very proficient in doing. I will cover this in the last section.

Working for Peace in Time of War

I acknowledge that much of Holtorf's article is not about Ukraine but rather Sweden and that the relationship between Russia and Sweden is very different than that of Russia and Ukraine. For one, Russia and Sweden do not have a history of imperial relations. Rather it is one of regional rivalry and, at times, alliance and cooperation. It would be quite a stretch for Russia to deny Sweden's existence and rather difficult to even wage a conventional war given the lack of a shared land-based border. There are, after all, a few countries between Sweden and Russia – a few countries that all have had Russian tanks on the streets of their cities. Thus, for this last part, I'd like to bring the things we see in Ukraine closer to western and northern Europe.

9 https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-energy-minister-russia-winter-challenge-fc55a4d954802aa80abebee3fe72820b (19.01.2026).

10 https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/12/11/russias-systematic-torture-of-ukrainian-pows (19.01.2026).

11 https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/25/get-passport-or-leave-russias-ultimatum-ukrainians (19.01.2026).

12 https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-occupation-update-december-4-2025/ (05.12.2025).

13 It is important to mention that Russia's current invasion has facilitated a cultural resistance on behalf of Ukrainians. From poems to electronic music, Ukrainian culture and Ukrainian language has experienced a boost because of the war despite its many challenges, not least of which is many artists, writers, and intellectuals signing up and being killed in the fighting. As examples see https://www.wordsforwar.com/ (21.01.2026) and https://www.kaltblut-magazine.com/ukraine-music-scene-war/ (21.01.2026).

14 https://www.euronews.com/2025/11/19/poland-closes-airports-after-russia-launches-hundreds-of-drones-at-ukraine (19.01.2026).

15 https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-gps-swedish-finnish-polish-jamming-tech-risks/ (19.01.2026).

As I sit and write this, I find myself at the Svalbard Museum in Longyearbyen, Svalbard – an Arctic archipelago that has belonged to the Kingdom of Norway since 1925. While Norway has 'full and absolute sovereignty' over the archipelago under the Svalbard Treaty (Svalbard Treaty 1920: Article 1), the unique provisions of the Svalbard Treaty stipulate that citizens and businesses of any signatory country have equal access to it. This is why, 37 kilometres away from where I'm sitting, is the town of Barentsburg which, since 1932, was operated by the government-owned Russian company Trust Arktikugol – this fact has led Barentsburg and other former Soviet/Russian settlements to be used to assert presence and special interest on this strategically important archipelago (Arlov 2003: 396–416; Moe and Jørgensen 2025).

For geographical context, Longyearbyen is located 955 kilometres from Tromsø, the closest connected commercial airport, 951 kilometres from the nearest NATO airbase in Lakselv, and only 694 kilometres away from the nearest Russian airbase of Nagurskoye on Franz Josef Land. Between this, the Soviet/Russian history on the archipelago, and the recent sabre rattling by global superpowers elsewhere in the Arctic, the atmosphere has been a little bit more tense (Moe and Jørgensen 2025).

In recent years, Svalbard has been the target of hybrid informational and sabotage operations (Myklebost et al. 2025a). Components of this have been the state-sanctioned performances celebrating the Second World War on Svalbard – even though no Soviet troops were stationed there during the war (Seitsonen 2025) – and the repeated assertion that 'Russians', in the form of Russian-speaking Pomors from the White Sea Region,[16] were the first peoples on Svalbard, thereby acting to serve Soviet/Russian attempts to claim special interests on the archipelago (Starkov 1993, 2005; for rebuttal see Hultgreen 2003, 2005).

For their part, the Norwegian authorities have not been innocent either by actively seeking to Norwegianise Svalbard. In addition to attempts to limit the number and curtail the rights of non-Norwegians living in Longyearbyen (Sokolíčková 2023: 113–166), they have prioritised the protection of built (Norwegian) heritage on the archipelago to the disadvantage of the (often international) archaeological heritage, spent large sums of money to erase recent mining legacies in the name of nature conservation (Ødegaard 2022), and designated most of the archipelago as a nature reserve – limiting access for locals and visitors while also inadvertently overlooking the over 400 years of human history in the region (Kruse 2016; Hansen 2025).

Meanwhile, the discourse of *beredskap* ('emergency preparedness') has entered Svalbard and Norwegian politics and cultural heritage management – borrowing in part on the developments and expertise from Sweden. The Riksatikvarens Høstmøte (the fall meeting of the Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage) in 2025 featured a session on preparedness in cultural heritage in case of crisis or war – including bringing in a guest speaker from Sweden.[17]

My feelings about this are complicated. On one hand, there is a very real sense of insecurity coming from Russia and other big Arctic players. This is exacerbated by the fact that, as per a 2008 agreement between the Governor of Svalbard and the Russian Academy of Sciences, Svalbard Museum stores tens of thousands of Pomor artifacts excavated by Soviet/Russian archaeologists and which have gained extra geopolitical sensitivity in recent years. On the other hand, there is a real sense of nationalisation of Svalbard that is limiting room to imagine and work towards possible (and hopefully more peaceful) futures that celebrate the international diversity of Svalbard's heritage. In this sense, I share an unease with Holtorf on the nationalisation of heritage in the context of cooling geopolitical relations.

So, what can be done? For this, I agree with Kari Aga Myklebost, Stian Bones, and Thomas Nilsen who, in the context of Svalbard, have recently advocated for the strengthening of institutional defences, international cooperation, and independent journalism as a counter to hybrid informational threats (Myklebost et al. 2025a: 34–36). Ultimately, what '*we must make possible*' (to use Holtorf's own words) is an open society that cherishes free and democratic principles and the sanctity of human life. As such, museums and other cultural institutions have a vital

16 Of course, the extent to which the Pomors are 'Russian' is also subject for discussion. For a recent genetic study, see Okovantsev et al. 2022.

17 The full recording of the session is available online at https://www.youtube.com/live/Mei-vUdpITo?si=1IuAd4rd5hBybRG&t=7674 (12.11.2025).

role to play to promote culture, foster dialogue, and provide nuanced, well-researched, knowledge-based information for a more informed and engaged society.

In this task, there is a lot of space to do what Holtorf advocates in working pluralistically with "cultural heritage by emphasizing similarities rather than differences between people" (Holtorf 2026: 31). However, there is an important caveat – cultural and historical cooperation across difference can only happen when they are between good faith actors who genuinely wish to develop closer ties across borders. As shown by Norwegian experience of decades of collaboration with Russia on the heritage of the Pomor trade and World War II in the Arctic, bad faith actors can seize upon these activities to promote harmful and destructive propaganda, while the parties still acting in good faith become 'useful idiots' in these nefarious schemes (Myklebost et al. 2025b). Cultural heritage can thereby promote mutual understanding, but this can only take place when parties are equally committed to genuine dialogue.

As I have laid out earlier, Russia has repeatedly used a distorted version of history to deny the right of Ukrainian people to exist, while on Svalbard this has been used to foment uncertainty given the rather complicated historical and jurisdictional context the archipelago finds itself in. For its part, Svalbard Museum has used its position to foster dialogue and discussions through exhibitions, lectures, and other events on topics such as Norwegian sovereignty, local democracy, and environmental politics.[18] If we are to promote peace, the capacities of museums and other cultural institutions should be strengthened in their core duties to preserve, research, and inform – not just for 'total defence' but for the proactive exercise of cultivating democracy and cooperation in the face of people who actively seek to destroy it.

Thus, I think it is misguided to speculate on the 'roles cultural heritage may play in the future' when there are very serious problems with how heritage is being used in the present. If anything, what is needed right now is a 'past literacy' – that one traditional strength of archaeology that some seem to sometimes forget. We need an archaeology/heritage practice that provokes, teaches, and challenges its audiences with the tools we have at our disposal (see also González-Ruibal et al. 2018). A practice that could undermine the very things that Holtorf highlights as problems – the essentialism of nation states, the absolutism of empires, and the normalcy of any present world system. A past literacy is what illustrates hybridity that exists between peoples, places, concepts, and ontologies, and we need more of that as an antidote to the propaganda of any totalitarian who wants to co-op the past for their own nefarious goals. In such a way, we would not be imagining a future of heritage that circumvents a hypothetical military confrontation but work in the present to maintain well-educated, open democracies which are worth protecting for a culture of peace.

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18 See the full list of upcoming and past events here – https://svalbardmuseum.no/arrangement (19.01.2026).

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