

Inhaltsverzeichnis/Table of Contents***Controversy: Alternative Futures***

Cornelius Holtorf	25
Alternative Futures: How Can Cultural Heritage Be Mobilized for Peace Rather than War?	
Carolin Jauß	37
Stellungnahme zu Cornelius Holtorf, <i>Alternative Futures: How Can Cultural Heritage Be Mobilized for Peace Rather than War?</i>	
Anna McWilliams	44
Response to <i>Alternative Futures: How Can Cultural Heritage Be Mobilized for Peace Rather than War?</i> : Building Resilience and Peace with Knowledge, not Rhetorics	
Anatolijs Venovcevs	46
When Heritage Goes to War – A Response to Cornelius Holtorf	
Hans P. Hahn	54
Mobilizing Cultural Heritage for Peace or for War? Note on the Necessity to Reflect on Terms and Implicit Normative Assumptions	
Laura McAtackney	57
Response to Holtorf's <i>Alternative Futures</i>	
Antonia Davidovic	59
Archäologien der Ambiguität. Kommentar zu Holtorfs <i>Alternative Futures</i>	
Stefan Burmeister	61
The Affordance of Critical Heritage Studies. A Commentary on Cornelius Holtorf's <i>Alternative Futures</i>	
Cornelius Holtorf	66
Reply: What Can Give Us Hope	
Simon Radchenko and Olha Demchenko	87
Reality Checks for <i>Alternative Futures</i>	

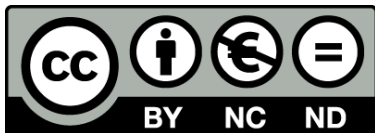
Alternative Futures: How Can Cultural Heritage Be Mobilized for Peace Rather than War?

Cornelius Holtorf

Zitiervorschlag

Holtorf, Cornelius. 2026. Alternative Futures: How Can Cultural Heritage Be Mobilized for Peace Rather than War? Forum Kritische Archäologie 15, Controversy: Alternative Futures: 25–36.

URL	https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-52134
ISSN	2194-346X



Dieser Beitrag steht unter der Creative Commons Lizenz CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 (Namensnennung – Nicht kommerziell – Keine Bearbeitung) International. Sie erlaubt den Download und die Weiterverteilung des Werkes / Inhaltes unter Nennung des Namens des*der Autor*in, jedoch keinerlei Bearbeitung oder kommerzielle Nutzung.

Weitere Informationen zu der Lizenz finden Sie unter: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>.

Alternative Futures: How Can Cultural Heritage Be Mobilized for Peace Rather than War?

Cornelius Holtorf

UNESCO Chair on Heritage Futures, Linnaeus University, Sweden, cornelius.holtorf@lnu.se

The devastating war in Ukraine has prompted a fundamental reassessment of Europe's future security. In this context, archaeologists and heritage professionals must critically examine the role of cultural heritage and the past in shaping modern conflicts. This is the starting point of my discussion. I will explore the consequences for society and policy of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent war, with a focus on cultural and heritage-related dimensions. I will also assess current policy responses, highlight their limitations, and consider alternative approaches that may foster more constructive outcomes. As I see it, the question is not whether peace *is possible* but how we can *make it possible*, drawing on the power of culture and cultural heritage. My aim is to create discussion and a broader debate on this important and timely topic.

My main point of reference is the current situation in Sweden but I suggest that the concerns raised are worth discussing elsewhere, too, because some if not all issues brought up have a much wider relevance throughout Europe and indeed beyond (McWilliams 2022; Clark and Dunkley 2023; Åse and Wendt 2025). Future research will have to complement my discussion not only with studies of the situation in other countries but also with more detailed literature reviews and examples of how the various ideas and strategies play out in local cases.

The war between Russia and Ukraine has had an enormous impact on Swedish politics. The Swedish government made its position very clear in statements of the Minister of Defence in a prime-time broadcast on Swedish National Television SVT on 15 September 2024 that it is in total agreement with the governments of Denmark, Norway, and Finland (who were also represented at Minister level in the same broadcast): there is a fast-growing threat of a military attack by Russia and an urgent need to engage in massive national re-armament coupled with a general process of preparation for war in the context of Sweden's "totalförsvar" (total defence). In this context, the four governments considered Finland and Sweden recently joining NATO, after decades of maintaining stability in the region by staying outside, as the only sensible policy and unavoidable for maintaining security in the aftermath of the Russian attack on Ukraine.

On 14 October 2024, the Government confirmed that the defence budget would increase dramatically until 2030. Since then, the defence budget has been raised dramatically several times, now targeting 3.5% of GDP in Sweden by 2030. This means that the rise between 2016 and 2026 amounts to nearly 300% and until 2030 it will be more like 400% (Figure 1).

This is in line with the complete change in defence policy that has occurred in Sweden as a result of the Russian invasion and the subsequent war in Ukraine. According to a statement by Micael Bydén, at the time the Commander-in-Chief of the Swedish Armed Forces, on TV4 on 8 Jan 2024 (translated by ChatGPT): "All residents should now prepare for war in Sweden. On an individual level, one must mentally prepare oneself" ("Alla invånare bör nu göra sig redo för krig i Sverige. På individnivå måste man mentalt förbereda sig").

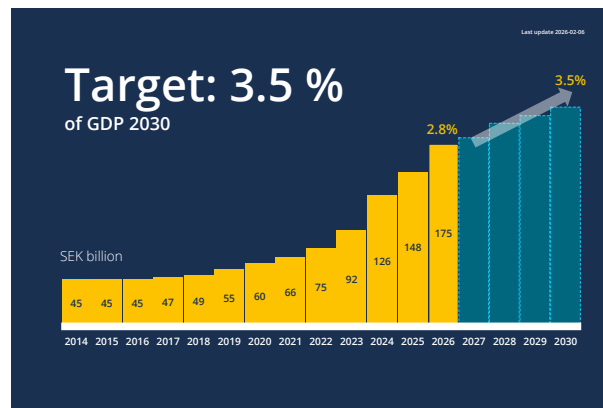


Fig. 1. Sweden's approved and estimated military budgets 2014-2030, excluding support to Ukraine. Source: Swedish government, <https://www.government.se/government-policy/military-budget/>. Last viewed 12.04.2026.

In November 2024, a brochure was delivered by the The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (Myndigheten för Samhällsberedskap, MSB) to all households, bearing the title “In case of crisis or war” (“Om krisen eller kriget kommer”) (Fig. 2). Among other things, it states that “If Sweden is attacked, we will never surrender. Any suggestion to the contrary is false.” I was shocked to realise how seriously this is meant when I read in my local newspaper on 29 January 2025 that room for 3,600 war graves was being prepared in my town – this being part of a national policy to create enough room for the graves of 5% (i.e. more than 500,000 human beings) of the population of Sweden.



Fig. 2. Cover of the brochure distributed to every household in Sweden (MSB 2024).

Cultural Heritage as the Flesh and Blood of the Nation

In the context of general war preparations in Sweden, state authorities in the Swedish cultural sector are now preparing for war, too (see also McWilliams 2022, cf. Bolin 2023; Åse and Wendt 2025). This is not a surprise as such, given what we know about the significance of culture as a foundational element of modern nation states, shaping social cohesion internally, national identity externally, and the shared values that guide political and civic life (Klintman 2019: 53). Whereas the military defends a state's territorial borders, culture defends the reason why borders have legitimacy (or not!) in the first place: its constitutional identity (Orgad 2015: ch. 1). In the nation, as anywhere, culture allows people to make sense of themselves and others. Cultural heritage and the historical narratives and values it evokes are a particularly important part of culture in this context and, by implication, of nations.

Based on evidence, among others, from Syria and Ukraine, MSB argues now that precautionary actions are needed to prevent future wars from destroying the tangible cultural heritage – better safe than sorry, as it were (MSB 2022: 131). By the same token, the Swedish Museum Association's annual meeting in 2023 featured a panel on museums' preparedness for crisis and war where the question addressed was how to develop collaboration and planning to promote both the protection of cultural heritage and the ability to conduct activities even during an ongoing crisis or war (RAÄ 2023a).¹ Similarly, the Kalmar County Region (Region Kalmar Län) held its yearly regional conference on cultural policy on 23 May 2024 in Gamleby, devoted to the topic of civil preparedness for crisis within the cultural sector (kris- och civil beredskap inom kulturområdet), while the annual meeting of the Association of Swedish County Museums (Länsmuseernas samarbetsråd) featured a session on 16 October 2024 on the preparedness of cultural heritage for war and peace.² On 23 Sept 2025, a conference on The Cultural and Leisure Sector's Role in Emergency Preparedness and Crisis Response (Kultur- och fritidsområdets roll i kris och beredskap) was held in Jönköping County, during which a regional Head of Cultural Development discussed cultural militarization (kulturell upprustning) under the motto "You are part of the total defence framework!" I was part of the last three gatherings, in each case being a very lonely voice for peace. Similar meetings are being held across the sector in the entire country. They all promote protective measures for cultural heritage in war. The underlying preservation paradigm in cultural heritage management has long been dominating the entire sector, being applied to perceived threats of development, natural disasters, climate change, war, and other destructive forces of our age (Bandarin 2024; González Zarandona et al. 2024).

In the light of these preparational activities in the entire cultural sector, it is not surprising that Sweden's 2024 White Paper on Defence features a sub-section stretching over two pages on cultural heritage (Swedish Government 2024: 142–143). It contains the following passages:

"Culture is a form of resistance in itself. This applies to both historical cultural heritage and contemporary culture. A vibrant and free cultural life contributes, in times of the threat of war or during war, to maintaining a certain normalcy in everyday life, increasing people's endurance, and fostering a will to defend. Therefore, it is essential to sustain cultural activities as much as possible even in a state of heightened preparedness. This requires special planning during peacetime.

Cultural heritage, as a symbol of history, identity, and memory, is at risk of being destroyed, looted, or misused for political purposes during war. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine demonstrates how attacks on cultural heritage can be systematically used to attempt to erase a national identity.

[...] there is a need for coordinated planning between cultural heritage stakeholders and preparedness actors for the relocation and protection of cultural heritage, as well as for the preservation of heritage that cannot be relocated in the event of heightened preparedness or war."³

1 Automated translation by Chat GPT from the original Swedish text: "Hur kan vi utveckla samverkan och planering för att främja såväl skydd av kulturarv som möjlighet att bedriva verksamhet även under pågående kris eller krig?"

2 <https://blogg.lnu.se/unesco/?p=3746>. Last viewed 26.09.2025.

3 Automated translation by Chat GPT (with one minor adjustment) from the original Swedish text: "Kulturlivet är en motståndskraft i sig. Detta gäller både det historiska kulturarvet och den samtida kulturen. Ett livaktigt och fritt kulturliv bidrar i händelse av krigsfara och krig till att vidmakthålla viss normalitet i vardagen, öka människors uthållighet och främja försvarsvilja och därmed är det angeläget att så långt som möjligt upprätthålla kulturverksamheter också i ett läge av höjd beredskap. Detta kräver särskild planering i fredstid. Kulturarv som symbol för historia, identitet och minne, riskerar att förstöras, plundras eller missbrukas i politiska syften under krig. Rysslands fullskaliga invasion i Ukraina visar hur angrepp mot kulturarv kan användas systematiskt för att försöka utradera en nationell identitet.... det finns ett behov av en samordnad planering för undanförelse och skydd av kulturarv mellan kulturarvsaktörer och beredskapsaktörer samt ett

Note the way culture and cultural life are described in terms of resistance (motståndskraft), strengthening endurance (uthållighet) and a will to defend (försvarsvilja). This is in line with how culture is used in the current conflict between Ukraine and Russia where cultural heritage and history serve on both sides to strengthen morale by reinforcing a strong sense of national identity on their respective territories and thereby instilling in the troops on both sides the perception of furthering a historical mission (Mick 2023; Munawar and Symonds 2023).⁴

The intellectual context within which Swedish state authorities now seem to be operating became clear when Anders Eriksson of the MSB was reported by the Swedish National Heritage Board (RAÄ 2023a) to have said during the Swedish Museum Association's annual meeting in 2023 that, "The experiences from Ukraine show that cultural heritage is not something secondary, but rather the very core of what must be defended in times of war. If total defence aims to protect the nation and its sovereignty, then cultural heritage is what gives the nation its flesh and blood, he argued."⁵ Based on available documentation, it appears that this statement went unchallenged in the current climate of a pre-war period in Sweden (but see Högberg and Holtorf 2023, 2024: 145–147). Most of the audience did apparently not care or was ignorant of the devastating consequences over the last couple of centuries of a "*Blut und Boden*" rhetoric, linking claims to ancestry (flesh and blood) with the nation's territory (soil). This logic is essentializing nations and demonizing 'the Other' through seemingly timeless us-and-them dichotomies. It is linked to rhetoric justifying warfare in the name of national sovereignty, backed up by the cultural heritage portraying a narrative about a single collective past (Holtorf 2017; Åse and Wendt 2025; see also Wollentz et al. 2020).

The rhetoric is nearly the same as what former Riksantikvarie Sigurd Curman proclaimed in the 1945 film "How Our History is Saved" (*Hur vår historia räddas*), where he stated about archaeological sites that "these monuments, in a way, constitute the indisputable 'charters' of our ancient right to this land."⁶ This in turn is not dissimilar to Alfred Rosenberg's infamous 1937 dictum that "The results of research about prehistory are the Old Testament of the German people."⁷ Rosenberg was the Nazi chief ideologist who headed the so-called Amt Rosenberg under Adolf Hitler. I find these similarities concerning the uses of archaeology and cultural heritage deeply worrying, even if I do not mean to imply that the overall political government agendas then and now have necessarily very much in common.

It is well understood how the links between cultural heritage and a toxic ethno-nationalism have led, during the past two centuries to two world wars, among other disasters (most recently Bonacchi 2022). Culture and cultural heritage can support dangerous propaganda and undermine social cohesion, and distance people from each other, thereby making divisions and violent conflicts between 'us and them' more likely than if the same people were to meet each other, knowing that they are belonging to the same human species, co-existing, and inhabiting a single planet (Högberg 2016; Maalouf 2012; Van der Laarse 2019; Vince 2022: 52–53; McWilliams 2025). For the social anthropologist Sharon Macdonald (2013: 162), it is an entirely open question "whether it is possible to draw on memory and heritage to form new identity stories that include, rather than exclude, cultural diversity and 'mixed' culture".

The risks of linking cultural heritage with exclusive 'tribal' identities persist today (Maalouf 2012). Cultural heritage and its perceived need of protection can still today be instrumentalised by military leaders to recruit and mobilise troops in ongoing wars (Fig. 3). In a recent study on Shia responses to the targeting of their religious heritage sites by the Islamic State in Iraq from mid-2014, Benjamin Isakhan and Ali Akbar (2022) showed how "key Shia leaders instrumentalized the case of protecting heritage not to advance peace and security, but to create

behov av planering för bevarande av kulturarv som inte kan föras undan i händelse av höjd beredskap eller krig."

4 <https://www.raa.se/lagar-och-stod/kulturmiljölagen-kml/om-kml/om-kml/>, <https://www.raa.se/lagar-och-stod/ansvar-lagar-och-andra-regelverk/>. Last viewed 27.10.2024.

5 Automated translation by Chat GPT from the original Swedish text: "erfarenheterna från Ukraina visar att kulturarvet inte är något sekundärt utan själva kärnan i det som ska försvaras vid krig. Om totalförsvaret syftar till att försvara nationen och dess självbestämmande så är kulturarvet det som ger nationen kött och blod, menade han."

6 Automated translation by Chat GPT from the original Swedish text: "dessa minnesmärken utgör på sätt och vis de oemotsägliga 'fastebreven' på vår urgamla besittningsrätt av detta landet."

7 Automated translation by Chat GPT from the original German text: "Die Ergebnisse der Vorgeschichtsforschung sind das Alte Testament des Deutschen Volkes."

entirely new militias, to recruit thousands of Shia faithful, to mobilize them to fight against the IS, and to engage in violence and human rights abuses.” This is shocking, given the abundant claims, not only in the context of UNESCO’s 1954 Hague Convention, that cultural heritage is serving peace (UNESCO 2021). Isakhan and Akbar argued that their case “raises significant concerns about whether the promotion of heritage as a pathway to peace could in-advertently exacerbate conflict and lead to renewed waves of violence and heritage destruction.”



Fig. 3. Peace Stone in Kungälv Sweden, erected in 1940 during World War II, to commemorate where the three Nordic Kings met in AD 1101 to make peace rather than war. A Swedish (and Nordic) monument strengthening national morale and to be protected from destruction in case of war against a non-Nordic enemy – or perhaps a historic message to be heeded to prevent war? Photograph: Cornelius Holtorf 2025.

It is disheartening in this context to observe that even many UNESCO World Heritage properties are, in practice, championed by the respective nation-states as symbols of their own cultural status and political merits. Patrick Rhamey (2019: 33) points out that “states seek status as recognition of their importance” and receiving World Heritage status from UNESCO can attribute such status. That can make sense in a post-colonial context where emerging national identities may provide frameworks for societal development. But it makes less sense when the UNESCO 1972 World Heritage Convention becomes a medium for expressing global tensions, sometimes incensing conflicts between peoples and nations. It was hardly a coincidence that in 2023, Ukraine was supported by UNESCO and the global community with the inscription of the Historic Centre of Odesa as a World Heritage property following an accelerated procedure that started after the beginning of the war. Even in this context, UNESCO World Heritage is thus complicit in a war that, according to media reports, has already resulted in more than one-and-a-half million human casualties among fighters on both sides, in addition to the many civilian victims and numerous devastated villages and towns throughout the war region, especially in eastern Ukraine and the territories occupied by Russia.

Should the heritage sector in Sweden and elsewhere really be looking on and itself preparing for war, while heritage in plain daylight is used to justify human carnage at a large scale?

There Is an Alternative

It appears to be current Swedish policy that protecting the safety of archaeological collections and drawing on stories about the past will strengthen the will to defend the country with arms in the name of sovereignty, national identity, and “flesh and blood” (kött och blod). As a precautionary action ahead of any possible military conflict the Swedish government and relevant authorities are taking extra steps of safeguarding the cultural heritage. In this process, the future is explicit in the form of an anticipated armed conflict when Russia is going to attack Sweden, possibly before the end of the decade. However, while this envisages a future political situation which is radically different than that of today, the imagined role of cultural heritage appears to remain unchanged or even move back in time to the second half of the 19th century: an irreplaceable source of knowledge and sentiment evoking ethno-nationalism and a symbol of national romanticism and associated identity politics, possessing inherent values that are timeless and must be safeguarded by protection and preservation plans (MSB 2022). In this view, questions about the future of cultural heritage are reduced to questions of ensuring indefinite preservation and accessibility.

Cultural heritage management, in the current (and past) Swedish logic, is seen in terms of

- caring for unique objects (tangible or intangible)
- which are possessing inherent and timeless values,
- symbolising “us” and our “national identity”, but
- frequently being fragile and in need of protection against threats
- so that they can be preserved and remain accessible for future generations.

Box 1.

But this is not the only way of making sense of cultural heritage. To engage constructively with new possible futures, we may need to rethink practices of using cultural heritage and perceptions of the past. How can we employ cultural heritage to serve other agendas than those of nationalism, exclusive identities, violence, and destruction, e.g., by offering a cultural logic that supports social and cultural sustainability? Could Sweden and other states use cultural heritage to prepare for future peace rather than war? As the 1945 UNESCO Constitution has it, since wars begin in the minds of humans, it is in the minds of humans that the defences of peace must be constructed, too. At the end of the day, this is a question about the human imagination (Wulf 2023): how can we imagine cultural heritage in roles that lead towards peace rather than war? It is also a question of practice and a ‘culture of peace’ to which cultural heritage can make important contributions (UNESCO 2013).

Sometimes I am told that we should do the best we can in circumstances out of our control, e.g., preserving what we can when war may lie ahead. But I insist that precisely in grave circumstances that may lead to war, it is not a matter of what *is possible* but of what we *must make possible* – avoiding war and its destructive consequences. Cultural heritage manifests and strengthens values, meanings, and loyalties that define societal pathways that can lead into different future directions. Safeguarding the national cultural heritage and making it accessible for present and future generations is not the only and seemingly self-evident policy of appreciating cultural heritage in relation to the many challenges of our present (Bandarin 2024).

There are other ways of future-making with cultural heritage than safeguarding its seemingly unchanging values in the light of physical threats. One approach, informed by what is known as ‘futures literacy’, would consider the roles cultural heritage may play in the future. Futures literacy means to become aware of one’s own and others’ present assumptions about the future and to acquire the capability of imagining and working for alternative futures, i.e. futures that differ from those commonly assumed in the present (Miller 2011; Mangnus et al. 2021). Such an approach applied to the future of cultural heritage leads us beyond questions of protection, preservation and accessibility. It may involve discussions of how museums and heritage authorities could develop their work to prevent future violent conflicts, among others by finding ways to avoid heritage being used for supporting binary narratives towards ‘the Other’ and thus avoiding processes that may be used to justify oppression and violence (Högberg 2016). This means, for example, to counter the use of exclusionary heritage practices in society and make sure not to engage in any kind of “blood and soil” (*Blut und Boden*) rhetoric or toxic ethno-nationalism.

Using cultural heritage to prepare for peace instead of war could also mean to invest in heritage practices that foster collaboration, mutual respect, and embracing change. This way of thinking would take into consideration existing knowledge about the destructive consequences that divisive uses of cultural heritage in crisis situations can have and which in the past have led to many societies failing to build sustainable futures (Wollentz 2017).

According to the National Heritage Board's plan delivered to the Swedish government for creating a Swedish National Council for Cultural Heritage Protection (RAÄ 2023b), there is currently an urgent need for capacity building and mobilization in order for museums and cultural heritage authorities to be able to carry out their roles and maintain daily operations in crisis situations. However, what has not yet been discussed in Sweden is to what extent we can and must also anticipate the need for new roles of and priorities for cultural heritage and heritage processes in society, thus enhancing societal resilience in the light of future change. This may involve more thinking and acting beyond protection and preservation efforts. One particular skill needed in changing political situations is an ability to accept and embrace transformation, change, and sometimes loss in relation to heritage and society (e.g., DeSilvey 2017, 2021; Holtorf 2018; Harrison et al. 2020; Holtorf and Högborg 2021).

Such an approach is situated in the realm of what has become known as heritage futures (Harrison et al. 2020) – acknowledging the significance of heritage in managing the relations between present and future societies, e.g., by planning for preconditions conducive to peace-making in an anticipated future situation. In the current context, museums and cultural heritage authorities in Sweden and elsewhere might choose to engage actively with heritage futures by drawing on futures literacy: exploring different possible futures and imagining uses of cultural heritage that serve peace, social sustainability and wellbeing, to name just a few worthwhile priorities for action.

We can envision a future where war is avoided, and security is built on trust, empathy, and recognition of our shared humanity. Such a future would foster collaboration and solidarity across borders and between societies. Re-imagining cultural heritage by emphasizing similarities rather than differences between people can provide one possible strategy for making a sustainable future. Values brought to heritage could change, from nation-building to peace-building.

Cultural heritage management, in this alternative logic, may be seen in terms of

- caring for, safeguarding and benefitting the wellbeing of people,
- including strengthening global solidarity and trust, by working for
- changing uses and values of heritage in relation to societal changes,
- thus allowing new benefits of heritage,
- while embracing transformation and sometimes loss.

Box 2.

Indeed, such a strategy links well to several past Swedish policy documents for the cultural heritage sector. Although now dated, it is worth remembering the final report of the Agenda Kulturarv (Operation Heritage) project (RAÄ 2004) which took a decisively people- and society-oriented view of cultural heritage, emphasizing the need for cultural heritage to contribute to sustainable development and storytelling. More recently, Sweden's World Heritage Strategy for 2020-2030 (RAÄ 2019: 29) defines in no uncertain terms that Sweden's vision is that "world heritage shows the way towards a sustainable and peaceful world" ("Världsarven visar vägen till en hållbar och fredlig värld"):

"The vision means that all work related to world heritage should, where relevant, demonstrate how world heritage efforts can be a resource for achieving the Agenda 2030 goals. [...] The fundamental idea and higher purpose of world heritage is peace, international cooperation, and human rights, and this should be in the consciousness of everyone working with world heritage." (RAÄ 2019: 29–30)⁸

8 Automated translation by Chat GPT from the original Swedish text: "Visionen innebär att allt arbete kopplat till världsarven bör, där det är relevant, visa på hur världsarvsarbetet kan vara en resurs för att nå Agenda 2030-målen. [...] Att grundtanken

The Swedish policy for cultural heritage has until now been an excellent example for the global shift over the past few decades from object-centred to people-centred approaches (Thompson and Wijesuriya 2018): from conserving the inherent properties of cultural heritage to managing its attributed values, from acknowledging the special responsibility of experts for taking care of cultural heritage to recognizing the ethical duty to listen to and involve the people affected by heritage, and from the need to protect monuments and sites to the opportunity to use them for people's benefit. If anything ought to be conserved or restored through cultural heritage it is people's lives and happiness. The title of Thompson and Wijesuriya's seminal paper (2018) sums up this shift nicely: from 'sustaining heritage' to 'heritage sustaining broader societal wellbeing and benefits.'

This shift towards people-centred approaches, according to which cultural heritage is about caring primarily for the lives of living people rather than the material legacies left behind by dead people, has been of increasing importance in the international discussion on cultural heritage management in recent decades (e.g., Lafrenz Samuels 2018). Today, it is a common paradigm for cultural heritage management in supranational and transnational contexts, including policies of UNESCO, the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), and in the work of bodies such as the World Archaeological Congress. Related strategies putting people first are found in the 2000 Council of Europe Landscape Convention and in the 2005 Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Faro Convention). A similar perspective was also put forward in Tatjana Cvjetičanin's (2025) keynote lecture at the most recent Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA). In a nutshell, cultural heritage is ceasing to be what it used to be, and these changes of perspective ought to inform even national legislation and policy as well as the way cultural heritage is widely understood in the population.

All this new policy ensures that cultural heritage serves the wellbeing of people and society not vice versa – people and society serving (for) cultural heritage in the name of any given 'tribal identity' (Maalouf 2012). Therefore, something is fundamentally wrong in the logic that the Swedish government and its authorities since 2022 want the cultural sector to follow in the context of adapting to a totalising civil defence strategy. In my view, the state, culture, and cultural heritage should continue to benefit people by maintaining or re-establishing peace and social cohesion, not by enhancing endurance and resistance against possible aggressors and increasing a will to defend national identity militarily (using terminology used in the Swedish government's 2024 White Paper on Defence cited earlier).

The shift towards people-centred policy regarding cultural heritage is in line with discussions in Cultural Heritage Studies since the 1990s that have expanded the understanding of what cultural heritage is and in what way it is significant in society (e.g., Smith 2006; Harrison 2013; Bandarin 2024). The traditional understanding of cultural heritage (Box 1) relates to the prospect of violent conflicts and war by addressing a perceived need of safeguarding valuable objects that are considered unique, fragile, and non-renewable but now exposed to new threats. The mentioned changes in recent heritage research and practice led to an alternative understanding of cultural heritage that relates the prospect of violent conflicts and war to opportunities of using cultural heritage in order to ensure people's wellbeing that is increasingly deemed at risk in the light of the various contemporary challenges including those reflected in societal preparations for war (Box 2). These uses of cultural heritage affect meanings of the past that can change people's minds and the way they make sense of themselves and others, e.g., affecting collective identities, shared values, mutual trust, and perceived political priorities. Unfortunately, these developments and changes in Cultural Heritage Studies that transform a future of fear for objects to a future of hope for people are not yet widely recognized outside the field itself and have not been sufficiently implemented in national policy, including foreign policy and defence (see also Rockman 2024; see Fig. 4).

In conclusion, I argue that we need to build on and develop an alternative strategy for managing cultural heritage in the prospect of war. This does not mean that I reject either nation-states or cultural heritage as such but rather that I see an urgent need for applying a rapidly emerging, alternative understanding of cultural heritage and how it best benefits people in current and future societies.

och det högre syftet med världsarv är just fred, internationellt samarbete och mänskliga rättigheter bör finnas i allas medvetande som arbetar med världsarv.”

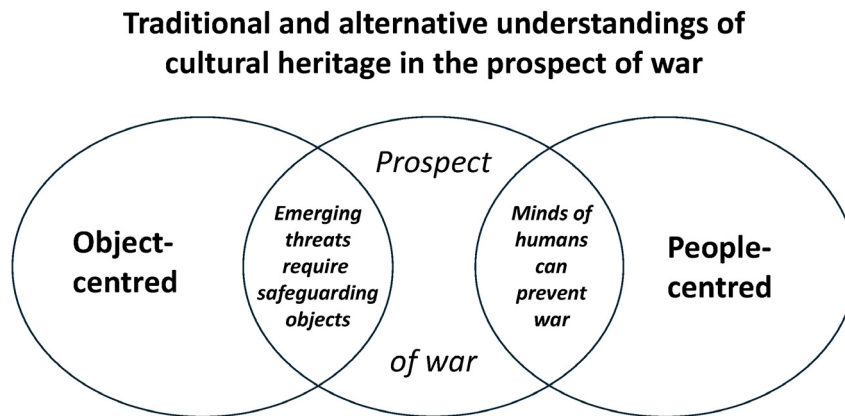


Fig. 4. Traditional and alternative understandings of cultural heritage and how they relate to the prospect of war: from a future of fear for objects to a future of hope for people.

It is high time to invest in Swedish and other societies' preparedness of culture and cultural heritage for maintaining peace, not winning wars. Archaeologists have important contributions to make to this necessary transformation.

Acknowledgments

The ideas and opinions expressed in this text are mine and not necessarily those of UNESCO. My thinking has been informed by joint work with Anders Högberg (e.g. Högberg and Holtorf 2023, 2024). I am grateful to Anders and two anonymous referees for critical comments that have improved the present paper.

References

- Arponen, Vesa P. J. and René Ohlrau. 2023. Archaeological Interpretation and Current Events: Some Reflections on the War in Ukraine from the Point of View of Philosophy of Archaeology and Anthropology. *Forum Kritische Archäologie* 12: 92–105. DOI: 10.17169/refubium-40726.
- Åse, Cecilia and Maria Wendt. 2025. Mobilising Sweden's Past to Prepare for War: Gendered Military Heritagization and 'Security Truths'. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 31(8): 1117–1137. DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2025.2535325.
- Bandarin, Francesco. 2024. *Changing Heritage: How Internal Tensions and External Pressures are Threatening Our Cultural and Natural Legacy*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bolin, Annalisa. 2023. Cultural Heritage and Armed Conflict: A Literature Review. Social Science Research Council. <https://www.ssrc.org/publications/cultural-heritage-and-armed-conflict-a-literature-review/>. Last viewed 26.09.2025.
- Bonacchi, Chiara. 2022. *Heritage and Nationalism. Understanding Populism Through Big Data*. London: UCL Press.
- Clack, Timothy and Mark Dunkley, eds. 2023. *Cultural Heritage in Modern Conflict: Past, Propaganda, Parade*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Cvjetićanin, Tatjana. 2025. From an Imagined Past to an Imagined Future: A Cross-section of Archaeology, Public Archaeology, and Heritage. Keynote Lecture, Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA), 2 September 2025. https://www.e-a-a.org/EAA2025/Programme/Keynotes/EAA2025/Programme_tabs/Keynotes.aspx?hkey=6f892065-2520-4fbe-8606-29bd8ca68418. Last viewed 26.09.2025.
- DeSilvey, Caitlin. 2017. *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- DeSilvey, Caitlin. 2021. Palliative Curation and Future Persistence: Life After Death. In Cornelius Holtorf and Anders Högborg, eds.: *Cultural Heritage and the Future*, pp. 217–229. London and New York: Routledge.
- González Zarandona, José Antonio, Emma Cunliffe and Melathi Saldin, eds. 2024. *The Routledge Handbook of Heritage Destruction*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Harrison, Rodney. 2013. *Heritage: Critical Approaches*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Harrison, Rodney, Caitlin DeSilvey, Cornelius Holtorf, Sharon Macdonald, Nadia Bartolini, Esther Breithoff, Harald Fredheim, et al., eds. 2020. *Heritage Futures. Comparative Approaches to Natural and Cultural Heritage Practices*. London: UCL Press.
- Högborg, Anders. 2016. To Renegotiate Heritage and Citizenship Beyond Essentialism. *Archaeological Dialogues* 23(1): 39–48. DOI: 10.1017/S1380203816000076.
- Högborg, Anders and Cornelius Holtorf. 2023. Heritage Practices and the Mobilization of Society in Times of Conflict: We Can Do Better. *The European Archaeologist (TEA)*, issue 78 (Autumn 2023). https://www.e-a-a.org/EAA/News___Publications/TEA_78_content/Debate. Last viewed 26.09.2025.
- Högborg, Anders and Cornelius Holtorf. 2024. Museum Futures and Other Heritage Futures. In Roberto Poli, ed.: *Handbook of Futures Studies*, pp. 145–156. Cheltenham and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.
- Holtorf, Cornelius. 2017. What's Wrong with Cultural Diversity in World Archaeology? *Clarusculo* 16: 1–14.
- Holtorf, Cornelius. 2018. Embracing Change: How Cultural Resilience Is Increased Through Cultural Heritage. *World Archaeology* 50(4): 639–650. DOI: 10.1080/00438243.2018.1510340.
- Holtorf, Cornelius and Anders Högborg, eds. 2021. *Cultural Heritage and the Future*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Klintman, Mikael. 2019. *Knowledge Resistance: How We Avoid Insight from Others*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Isakhan, Benjamin and Ali Akbar. 2022. Problematizing Norms of Heritage and Peace: Militia Mobilization and Violence in Iraq. *Cooperation and Conflict* 57(4): 516–534. DOI: 10.1177/00108367221093161.
- Lafrenz Samuels, Kathryn. 2018. *Mobilizing Heritage: Anthropological Practice and Transnational Prospects*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Maalouf, Amin. 2012. *In the Name of Identity. Violence and the Need to Belong*. New York: Arcade.
- Mangnus, Astrid C., Jeroen Oomen, Joost M. Vervoort and Maarten A. Hajer. 2021. Futures Literacy and the Diversity of the Future. *Futures* 132: Art. 102793. DOI: 10.1016/j.futures.2021.102793.
- McWilliams, Anna. 2022. Kulturarvets betydelse i krig och konflikt: En diskussion om behov av kulturarvsforskning för totalförsvaret. Report FOI-R--5362--SE. FOI: Kista: Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut. <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5362--SE>. Last viewed 26.09.2025.
- McWilliams, Anna. 2025. Konstens roll i krig. (Civilt försvar: psykologiskt försvar och försvarvilja). FOI Memo 8882. Kista: Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut (FOI). <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20Memo%208882>. Last viewed 26.09.2025.

- Mick, Christoph. 2023. The Fight for the Past: Contested Heritage and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice* 14(2): 135–153. DOI: 10.1080/17567505.2023.2205703.
- Miller, Riel. 2011. Opinion: Futures Literacy – Embracing Complexity and Using the Future. *Ethos: A Publication of Civil Service College, Singapore* 10: 23–28.
- MSB. 2022. Civilt försvar mot 2030 – Ett totalförsvar i balans: Slutredovisning av regeringsuppdrag (Ju2022/01209/SSK). Stockholm: MSB.
- MSB. 2024. In Case of Crisis or War (Brochure). Stockholm: MSB.
- Munawar, Nour A. and James Symonds. 2023. Empires of Lies? The Political Uses of Cultural Heritage in War. *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice* 14(3): 308–325. DOI: 10.1080/17567505.2023.2205193.
- Orgad, Liav. 2015. *The Cultural Defense of Nations: A Liberal Theory of Majority Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- RAÄ. 2004. Putting People First: Operation Heritage Policy Statement. Stockholm: Riksantikvarieämbetet. <https://raa.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1298666/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Last viewed 26.09.2025.
- RAÄ. 2019. Nationell strategi för världsarvet: Avrapportering av regeringsuppdraget att utarbeta en nationell världsarvsstrategi. Stockholm: Riksantikvarieämbetet. <https://www.raa.se/app/uploads/2019/11/Avrapportering-av-regeringsuppdraget-att-utarbeta-en-nationell-v%C3%A4rldsarvsstrategi.pdf>. Last viewed 26.09.2025.
- RAÄ. 2022. Riksantikvarieämbetets underlag för åtgärder inom civilt försvar. RAÄ-2022-1839. Stockholm: Riksantikvarieämbetet.
- RAÄ. 2023a. Nyheter. Beredskap i fokus på Vårmotet: ”Kulturarvet är själva kärnan i det vi ska försvara”. <https://www.raa.se/2023/04/beredskap-i-fokus-pa-varmotet-kulturarvet-ar-sjalva-karnan-i-det-vi-ska-forsvara/>. Last viewed 27.10.2024.
- RAÄ 2023b. Förutsättningar och former för ett nationellt kulturskyddsråd: Redovisning av regeringsuppdrag Ku2023/00471. Stockholm: Riksantikvarieämbetet. <http://raa.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1786795/FULLTEXT02.pdf>. Last viewed 26.09.2025.
- Rhamey, Patrick. 2019. Status and the Protection of Heritage Sites in Times of Conflict. In Comisia Națională a României pentru UNESCO, ed.: *Heritage Revivals – Heritage for Peace*, pp. 32–35. Bucharest: Romanian National Commission for UNESCO. https://www.cnr-unesco.ro/uploads/media/revista_HERE_eng.pdf. Last viewed 26.09.2025.
- Rockman, Marcy. 2024. Capacity of the U.S. Federal System for Cultural Heritage to Meet Challenges of Climate Change. *PNAS* 121(15): Art. e2317158121. DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2317158121.
- Smith, Laurajane. 2006. *Uses of Heritage*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Swedish Government. 2024. Totalförsvaret 2025–2030. Regeringens proposition 2024/25:34. <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/proposition/2024/10/prop.-20242534>. Last viewed 26.09.2025.
- Thompson, Jane and Gamini Wijesuriya. 2018. From ‘Sustaining Heritage’ to ‘Heritage Sustaining Broader Societal Wellbeing and Benefits.’ An ICCROM Perspective. In Peter Bille Larsen and William Logan, eds.: *World Heritage and Sustainable Development: New Directions in World Heritage Management*, pp. 180–195. London and New York: Routledge.
- UNESCO. 2013. UNESCO’s Programme of Action: Culture of Peace and Non-Violence: A Vision in Action. Paris: UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000217786>. Last viewed 26.09.2025.
- UNESCO. 2021. Implementation Strategy of the Thematic Programme “Heritage for Peace.” https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379819_eng. Last viewed 26.09.2025.

- Wollentz, Gustav. 2017. Making a Home in Mostar: Heritage and the Temporalities of Belonging. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 23(10): 928–945. DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2017.1347891.
- Wollentz, Gustav, Sarah May, Cornelius Holtorf and Anders Högberg. 2020. Toxic Heritage: Uncertain and Unsafe. In Rodney Harrison, Caitlin DeSilvey, Cornelius Holtorf, Sharon Macdonald, Nadia Bartolini, Esther Breithoff, Harald Fredheim et al., eds.: *Heritage Futures: Comparative Approaches to Natural and Cultural Heritage Practices*, pp. 294–312. London: UCL Press.
- Wulf, Christoph. 2023. Imagination. In Nathanaël Wallenhorst and Christoph Wulf, eds.: *Handbook of the Anthropocene: Humans Between Heritage and Future*, pp. 879–883. Cham: Springer.

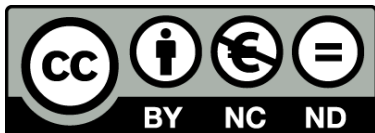
Stellungnahme zu Cornelius Holtorf, *Alternative Futures: How Can Cultural Heritage Be Mobilized for Peace Rather than War?*

Carolin Jauß

Zitiervorschlag

Jauß, Carolin. 2026. Stellungnahme zu Cornelius Holtorf, *Alternative Futures: How Can Cultural Heritage Be Mobilized for Peace Rather than War?* Forum Kritische Archäologie 15, Controversy: Alternative Futures: 37–43.

URL	https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-52173
ISSN	2194-346X



Dieser Beitrag steht unter der Creative Commons Lizenz CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 (Namensnennung – Nicht kommerziell – Keine Bearbeitung) International. Sie erlaubt den Download und die Weiterverteilung des Werkes / Inhaltes unter Nennung des Namens des*der Autor*in, jedoch keinerlei Bearbeitung oder kommerzielle Nutzung.

Weitere Informationen zu der Lizenz finden Sie unter: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>.

Stellungnahme zu Cornelius Holtorf, *Alternative Futures: How Can Cultural Heritage Be Mobilized for Peace Rather than War?*

Carolin Jauß

Institut für Vorderasiatische Archäologie, Freie Universität Berlin

Anlass für den Beitrag Cornelius Holtorfs ist eine Entwicklung in Schweden, die Kulturerbe verstärkt vor dem Hintergrund eines drohenden Kriegs diskutiert, die Rolle von Kultur im Rahmen einer Gesamtverteidigungsstrategie verhandelt und die nach Holtorfs Beobachtung im „Kulturerbebetrieb“ unhinterfragt bleibt.

Der derzeitige Fokus europäischer Staaten auf Verteidigung, sowohl fiskalisch als auch rhetorisch, ist kein allein schwedisches Phänomen. Die Kurzsichtigkeit, mit der diese Politik verfolgt wird, ohne eine Idee davon zu haben oder zumindest ohne zu vermitteln, wo man auf lange Sicht mit dieser Politik hin möchte, kritisiert auch Daniel Marwecki in seiner in Deutschland derzeit viel diskutierten Gegenwartsanalyse *Die Welt nach dem Westen* und konstatiert: „[...] Rüstung ohne eine positive Vision von Zukunft wird sich im Nachhinein als Kriegsvorbereitung herausstellen“ (Marwecki 2025: 212).

Holtorf appelliert daran, positive Zukünfte zu denken. Er tut dies in einer Zeit, in der die Gegenwart sich gefühlt so schnell bewegt, dass die Kapazitäten kaum ausreichen, um sie zu begreifen und in der der Blick in die Zukunft auf Katastrophen gerichtet ist, auf die es sich gilt, in der Gegenwart vorzubereiten (Voges 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). Es ist eine Zeit, in der kein Platz mehr zu sein scheint für positive Zukünfte. Holtorfs Apell ist eine Erinnerung daran, wie wichtig es gerade jetzt ist, ihnen (wieder) Raum einzuräumen.

„Wie kann kulturelles Erbe nutzbar gemacht werden für Frieden, statt für Krieg?“ – noch vor wenigen Jahren hätte diese Frage, die Holtorf 2026 für die Überschrift seines Beitrags in *Forum Kritische Archäologie* (FKA) gewählt hat, aus der Zeit gefallen geklungen. So sehr war der erste Satzteil – die konstruktive Rolle von Kulturerbe zum Erhalt von Frieden – das Credo von Kulturpolitik nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg geworden (s. Holtorf 2026: 32). Doch wie vieles, das bis vor Kurzem selbstverständlich erschien und nicht hinterfragt wurde, zeigt sich auch bei diesem Credo, dass es hohl ist, wenn man es nicht aktiv mit Leben füllt.

Holtorf kritisiert in seinem Beitrag zweierlei. Einerseits, dass die Erhaltung von Kulturerbe und sein Schutz vor unterschiedlichen Bedrohungen, einschließlich Krieg, im gesamten Bereich des Umgangs mit Kulturerbe zu breiten Raum einnehme. Dies sei geradezu zu einem Paradigma des Kulturerbesektors geworden (2026: 27). Zum anderen diskutiert er, dass das symbolische und identitätsstiftende Potenzial von Kulturerbe – einschließlich UNESCO-Welterbe – ganz entgegen der von der UNESCO ursprünglich angestrebten verbindenden und friedensfördernden Rolle – für nationalistische Zwecke bis hin zur Rechtfertigung von Krieg genutzt werde. Er beleuchtet diese beiden Themenkomplexe breit. Ich werde mich im Folgenden lediglich zwei Aspekten widmen: zum einen der Verbindung von Kulturgutschutz und Zivil- bzw. Katastrophenschutz und zum anderen der Verbindung von Politik und Kulturerbe. Für keines der drei Gebiete – Kulturerbe, Zivil- und Katastrophenschutz genauso wie Sicherheits- oder Kulturpolitik – bin ich Expertin. Meine Ausführungen beruhen auf einer eher oberflächlichen Recherche und mögen daher lückenhaft sein. Ich hoffe, sie ergänzen Holtorfs Artikel dennoch in produktiver Weise.

In einem Forschungsprojekt am Leibniz-Zentrum für zeithistorische Forschung (ZZF) untersucht Jonathan Voges Veränderungen in der Sicherheitspolitik Deutschlands nach dem Ende des Kalten Krieges (Voges 2025a, 2025b,

2025c; Deutschlandfunk Nova 2026). Im Zentrum seines Projektes „[...] steht die Frage, wie es dazu kam, dass das moderne Versprechen, Zukunft planen zu können und Gefahren präventiv verhindern zu können, von einem sicherheitspolitischen Denken und Handeln abgelöst wurde“ (Voges 2025c). Seit Mitte der 1990er-Jahre habe sich ausgehend von den USA ein fundamentaler Wandel der Sicherheitskultur vollzogen. Zunächst sei nicht mehr die Katastrophe selbst als Problem gesehen worden, sondern das „Unvorbereitet-Sein“ auf die Katastrophe. Sicherheitspolitik bzw. Katastrophenschutz, die zuvor Prävention – also die Verhinderung von Katastrophen – zum Ziel hatten, hätten sich unterdessen dahingehend entwickelt, ausschließlich auf die Vorbereitung vor der Katastrophe, die Reaktion auf die Katastrophe und die Minderung von deren Folgen ausgerichtet zu sein. Dazu gehöre auch, Bevölkerungen mental auf Unsicherheiten vorzubereiten und sie von einer Risikokultur zu überzeugen. Wären zunächst vor allem Naturkatastrophen und Epidemien im Blick gewesen, so seien seit den islamistischen Anschlägen vom 11. September 2001 auf das World Trade Center terroristische Anschläge hinzugekommen und in den letzten Jahren auch wieder der Kriegsfall. Katastrophen würden unterdessen in Politik und Gesellschaft für unvermeidbar gehalten. ‚*Preparedness*‘ sei ein Schlüsselbegriff, anhand dessen sich diese von Voges als Paradigmenwechsel charakterisierte Entwicklung analysieren und beschreiben ließe. In dieser Logik scheint es über die Katastrophe hinaus gar keine Zukunft mehr zu geben. Wenn dieses Denken, in dem weder eine Zukunft ohne Katastrophe noch eine nach der Katastrophe existiert, nun auch auf das Denken mit Bezug zu Krieg übertragen wird, ist das fatal.

Der Schutz von Kulturgut ist – wie Holtorf das in seinem Beitrag beschreibt – scheinbar Teil dieser Entwicklung. Dass Kulturgut Objekt des Zivilschutzes ist, hat eine lange Tradition. Internationale Regelungen zum Schutz von Kulturgut in bewaffneten Konflikten enthielt bereits das in Den Haag im Jahr 1899 unterzeichnete *Abkommen, betreffend die Gesetze und Gebräuche des Landkrieges*, und das *Haager Abkommen vom 14. Mai 1954 für den Schutz von Kulturgut bei bewaffneten Konflikten* widmet sich allein diesem Thema (Bundesamt für Bevölkerungsschutz und Katastrophenhilfe 2012). Sieht man sich hingegen die UNESCO-Verfassung von 1945 an, so betont diese die Bedeutung der Verbreitung von Kultur, um „Frieden im Geist der Menschen“ zu verankern (UNESCO 2001 [1945]). Es gab also durchaus direkt nach dem Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs ein starkes inhaltliches ‚Gegengewicht‘ zur reinen Frage des Schutzes von Kulturgut. Mit dem *Übereinkommen zum Schutz des Kultur- und Naturerbes der Welt*, der UNESCO-Welterbekonvention, kam dann in den 1970er-Jahren der Schutzgedanke hinzu (UNESCO 1972). Im Vordergrund stand laut Präambel der Schutz vor Zerfall auch durch sich wandelnde soziale und wirtschaftliche Ursachen und dezidiert die Notwendigkeit, dies gemeinschaftlich international umzusetzen. Im Fokus der Aktivitäten der UN zum Katastrophenschutz, insbesondere mit Bezug zu Naturkatastrophen, scheint Kulturerbe zunächst nicht gewesen zu sein (UNISDR 2005; UNDRR 2026a, 2026b). Im aktuellen UN-Rahmen zur Katastrophenvorsorge, dem *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030*, wird Kulturerbe (nicht Kultur!) hingegen gleichberechtigt neben Wirtschaft, Sozialem, Gesundheit, Bildung und Umwelt genannt (UNISDR 2015). Auf diesem internationalen Rahmenwerk basieren wiederum nationale Strategien wie beispielsweise die deutsche Resilienzstrategie von 2022 (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat 2022). Es stellt sich meines Erachtens zum einen die Frage, wie genau es dazu kam, dass Kulturerbe ein Teilbereich auch des Katastrophenschutzes oder aktueller ‚Resilienzstrategien‘ wurde und zum anderen, weshalb nicht nur Expertinnen und Experten für Zivil- und Katastrophenschutz, sondern auch solche für Kulturerbe die Logik des ‚*Preparedness*‘ übernommen haben. Vielleicht hängt die starke inhaltliche Anbindung des Kulturerbebereichs über den Kulturgut- beziehungsweise Denkmalschutz an den Katastrophenschutz mit einer zunehmenden Institutionalisierung zusammen, die sicher auch von dem Konzept des UNESCO-Welterbe innerhalb der UN befördert beziehungsweise global transportiert wurde. Vielleicht hat das Übergewicht des Administrativen gegenüber dem Inhaltlichen auch damit zu tun, dass ein eigener Sektor des Kulturerbemanagements weniger verbunden ist mit archäologischer oder historischer Forschung und stattdessen enger mit administrativen Strukturen u. a. zum Katastrophenschutz und staatlicher Tourismusförderung?

Erhalt und Schutz von Kulturerbe haben ihre Berechtigung. Doch scheint die Balance verloren gegangen zu sein. Von der Nachkriegs-Idee, dass Kulturerbe erhaltens- und schützenswert ist, weil es zu einer friedlichen Welt beitragen kann, scheint vor allem übrig geblieben zu sein, dass es geschützt (und touristisch vermarktet) wird.

Gleichzeitig scheint dem Problem beziehungsweise der Gefahr, dass der Bedeutungszuwachs, den Kulturerbe vor dem Hintergrund, dass es zu positiven Entwicklungen beitragen kann, erfahren hat, ins genaue Gegenteil dessen verkehrt werden könnte, wozu er eigentlich gedacht war, kaum Beachtung geschenkt worden zu sein. Ein Beispiel

dafür ist ein Vortrag, gehalten 2019 im Yarmouk Cultural Center in Kuwait von Markus Hilgert in seiner damaligen Funktion als Generalsekretär der *Kulturstiftung der Länder*, die im Auftrag der deutschen Bundesländer Kunst- und Kulturförderung betreibt (Hilgert 2019).¹ Hilgert beschreibt, dass die positive Wirkung von Kultur in gesellschaftliche Bereiche jenseits der Kultur in Publikationen der EU, OECD bis hin zur UN zunehmende Anerkennung erfahre und sieht darin einen „cultural turn in politics“. Dieser könne zusätzlich befördert werden, wenn die langfristigen positiven Effekte von Kultur auf nachhaltige Entwicklung, Frieden und Sicherheit, soziale Stabilität, gute Regierungsführung und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung besser erforscht, bestenfalls quantitativ messbar wären, was wiederum die Bereitschaft von staatlichen Akteuren zu höheren Förderausgaben für den Kulturbereich erhöhen könnte. Der Vortrag ist im Grunde ein Plädoyer für das, was auch Holtorf fordert: Die Befassung mit Kultur und Kulturerbe zum Wohle von Gesellschaften. Der Unterschied zu Holtorf ist, dass Hilgert nicht mit einem Satz thematisiert, dass dies nicht selbstverständlich ist. Dass Effekte von Kultur auf Gesellschaft auch negativ genutzt werden könnten, dass sie nicht nur „Katalysator friedlicher internationaler Beziehungen“ (Hilgert 2019) sondern auch Katalysator nationalistischer Bestrebungen bis hin zu Kriegen sein können, scheint 2019 noch nicht (wieder) besprechenswert gewesen zu sein. Die bewusste Zerstörung von Kulturerbe, wie sie beispielsweise durch den Islamischen Staat oder auch das Assad-Regime während des Krieges in Syrien praktiziert wurde und die auch von Hilgert erwähnt wird, führte nicht dazu, sich stärker inhaltlich mit der eigenen Konstruktion der Bedeutung von Kulturerbe und der in alle Richtungen offenen Instrumentalisierung von Kulturerbe zu befassen, sondern verstärkte – wie auch Holtorf schreibt – lediglich die Schutzbemühungen.

Es ist eigentlich eine Binsenweisheit: Sein Potenzial für eine positive Zukunft entfaltet Kulturerbe alles andere als automatisch aus sich heraus, wenn man es nur ausreichend schützt. Dieses in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts vor dem Hintergrund des Zweiten Weltkriegs in den Vordergrund gestellte Potenzial muss bewusst und aktiv befördert werden. Holtorfs deutlicher Appell, gegebenenfalls auch auf Kosten von Kapazitäten für den Schutz von Kulturerbe, gezielt über sein positives Potenzial nachzudenken und es nutzbar zu machen zum Wohle von Menschen und „globaler Solidarität“, ist deshalb richtig.

Gleichzeitig zeigt Holtorfs Schilderung der Situation in Schweden, dass dieses ‚richtig‘ gerade jetzt auch wichtig ist. Ist die Betonung der globalen Bedeutung und der Verbindung und Verständnis fördernden Wirkung von Kultur in einer Zeit entstanden, in der generell nach einem verheerenden Weltkrieg die Verständigung und Friedenssicherung im Vordergrund stand, so spiegelt die von Holtorf für Schweden beschriebene Entwicklung die sich seit einiger Zeit in vielen Staaten abzeichnende Tendenz zur ‚Rückbesinnung‘ auf den Nationalstaat.

Im ersten Teil seines Artikels beschreibt Holtorf, dass der Kulturerbebereich in Schweden Teil von Gesamtbestrebungen zur Vorbereitung auf einen Kriegsfall ist und dabei Kultur, Geschichte und Kulturerbe laut den angeführten Regierungspapieren explizit zu nationalistisch nach innen gerichteter Identitätsstärkung und Abgrenzung nach außen genutzt werden soll. Er bespricht nicht, wann und wie diese Entwicklung einsetzte, zitiert jedoch eine schwedische Strategie zu UNESCO-Welterbe, die noch 2019 die Perspektive einnahm, dass Welterbe den Weg zu einer nachhaltigen und friedlichen Welt weisen könne. Es scheint also eine neue und schnelle Entwicklung gewesen zu sein und/oder eine von der Kulturpolitik selbst abgekoppelte. Die Entwicklung scheint vielmehr auf der Verbindung des Kulturerbebereichs mit Zivil- und Katastrophenschutz zu beruhen. Jedenfalls stammt das von Holtorf zur Illustration der Entwicklung angeführte, drastische Zitat, das 2023 auf einer Veranstaltung der *Swedish Museum Association* vorgeführt wurde, von einem Mitarbeiter der Katastrophenschutzbehörde.

Holtorf schildert die inhaltliche Entwicklung; eine institutionelle beziehungsweise strukturelle Einordnung des Kultursektors in Schweden nimmt er nicht vor. Für seine Argumentation ist dies grundsätzlich nicht notwendig. Für ein besseres Verständnis der Situation in Schweden selbst wäre es jedoch interessant zu wissen, wer diesen Diskurs initiiert hat und wer oder was ihn treibt, wer die damit verbundene Maßnahmen umsetzt, wie sie finanziert werden und wie politisch die eingebundenen Institutionen und Verwaltungsbehörden sind. Wie politisch ist die Katastrophenschutzbehörde in Schweden – sind beispielsweise die Ämter dort reine Verwaltungsstellen oder politisch besetzt? Welche organisatorischen und eventuell auch finanziellen Verbindungen gibt es in Schweden zwischen der Museumslandschaft und dem Katastrophenschutz und gegebenenfalls seit wann?

1 Markus Hilgert ist seit April 2025 Präsident der Universität der Künste, Berlin und seit November 2025 Präsident der Kulturpolitischen Gesellschaft. Diese plant für das 3. Heft 2026 der Zeitschrift *Kulturpolitische Mitteilungen* einen Schwerpunkt „III/2026: Kultur und Kulturpolitik gegen rechte Vereinnahmung“.

Doch nicht nur für ein besseres Verständnis wäre dies relevant, sondern auch wenn man, wie Holtorf fordert, aktiv einen anderen Weg einschlagen will. Denn soll dieser Weg nicht auf theoretischer Ebene verharren, sondern tatsächlich eine Wirkung entfalten, müssten die gewonnene Erkenntnis und die daraus entstehenden Narrative oder Szenarien ja entweder genau dort ankommen, wo heute die Katastrophe oder wie in Schweden der Kriegsfall im Blick ist oder aber dezidiert andere Räume finden, in denen sie gesellschaftlich wirksam werden.

Auch eine politische Einordnung der Entwicklungen nimmt Holtorf nicht vor, doch auch dies wäre meines Erachtens wichtig. Der martialische Ton der von Holtorf zum Eingang seines Beitrags zitierten Informationsbroschüre der schwedischen Katastrophenschutzbehörde war kurz nach ihrem Erscheinen auch deutschen Medien aufgefallen. In dem bereits oben erwähnten Vortrag zitiert Voges beispielhaft einen Artikel mit dem Titel *Krieg und Nudeln* in dem Alex Rühle im November 2024 in der Süddeutschen Zeitung die schwedische Broschüre im Vergleich mit in etwa zeitgleich erschienenen Publikationen aus Norwegen und Finnland besprach (Voges 2025a; Rühle 2024). Rühle stellt fest, dass sich die schwedische Broschüre von den beiden anderen durch die Betonung auf den Kriegsfall deutlich unterscheide, streicht die gleichen Sätze heraus, die auch Holtorf zitiert und ordnet sie folgendermaßen ein:

„Wenn Schweden angegriffen wird, werden wir niemals aufgeben. Alle Informationen, dass der Widerstand eingestellt wird, sind falsch.“ Alles im Indikativ, so als sei dieses ‚wenn‘ keine Eventualität, sondern eine Zeitangabe, und es gehe nur noch darum, wie man mit dem – wahrscheinlich ja russischen – Angriff nun umgeht. Insgesamt wird 29 Mal das Wort Krieg verwendet. [...] Auf die Anfrage der SZ, warum die schwedische Broschüre so oft von Krieg spreche, als ob der schon da sei, antwortet die zuständige Behörde für Katastrophenschutz, die martialischen Eingangssätze – ‚Wenn Schweden angegriffen wird, werden wir niemals aufgeben. Alle Informationen, dass der Widerstand enden wird, sind falsch‘ – hätten schließlich schon in der ersten schwedischen Broschüre dieser Art gestanden.“ (Rühle 2024)

Diese erste Broschüre sei, so Rühle, 1943, mitten im Zweiten Weltkrieg erschienen. Die finnische Publikation dagegen verwende das Wort Krieg gar nicht, die norwegische spreche davon, dass „[...] extreme Wetterbedingungen, Pandemien, Unfälle, Sabotage und im schlimmsten Fall auch Kriegshandlungen [...]“ Norwegen treffen könnten. Rühle meint, der Ton der schwedischen Broschüre passe zur Regierungsrhetorik, die immer wieder an Schnappatmung grenze und zitiert eine finnische Journalistin, die das „bellizistische Feuerwerk“ schwedischer Politiker *innen damit kommentierte, man würde „[...] in Finnland [...] derartig drastische Rhetorik ‚als Hysterie bezeichnen [...]“. Mit dem Wort Krieg spielt man nicht“ (Rühle 2024). Die Broschüre der schwedischen Katastrophenschutzbehörde transportiert also gezielt das von der schwedischen Regierung unter scheinbar bewusstem Rückgriff auf die im Zweiten Weltkrieg verwendete Rhetorik gepflegte Narrativ. Und selbiges wurde über einen Mitarbeiter der Behörde bereits vor Erscheinen der Broschüre, schon 2023 auf einer Veranstaltung des schwedischen Museumsverbands eingeführt.

Auch in Deutschland nimmt ein Diskurs zur Wehrhaftigkeit seit dem Beginn des russischen Angriffskriegs auf die Ukraine 2022 breiten Raum ein, der allerdings ebenfalls deutlich zurückhaltender geführt wird als in Schweden. Eine Verbindung von Wehrhaftigkeit zu Kulturerbe ist in relevanten deutschen Regierungspublikationen auf Bundesebene nicht zu finden.² Allerdings ist der Bund in Deutschland auch lediglich für den Schutz von

2 Die 2023 publizierte erste nationale Sicherheitsstrategie ist explizit im Gegensatz zum bisherigen allein auf Verteidigung ausgerichteten Weißbuch interdisziplinär ausgerichtet, Kultur wird jedoch nicht thematisiert (Auswärtiges Amt 2023; Bundesregierung 2023). Auch in den Publikationen der Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik, die sich mit der nationalen Sicherheitsstrategie befassen, findet sich bei einer Suche nach dem Wort ‚Kultur‘ über Begriffe wie ‚Sicherheitskultur‘ oder ähnliches hinaus kein Treffer (<https://www.baks.bund.de/de>; Stand Januar 2026). Die 2022 publizierte, ressortübergreifende Resilienzstrategie enthält eine knappe Seite zum Kulturgutschutz (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat 2022). Der 2024 veröffentlichte Umsetzungsplan zur Resilienzstrategie beschreibt zwar Kulturgüter als identitätsstiftend, zielt jedoch lediglich auf deren Schutz ab. In dem Plan wird die „Durchführung von öffentlichkeitswirksamen Veranstaltungen und Beiträgen zur Problematik der drohenden Vernichtung von Kunstwerken und Kulturgütern durch Krieg [...]“ als Schwerpunkt genannt und er enthält Maßnahmen im Bereich Kulturgutschutz, darunter historische Forschung, die unter anderem die Politisierung des Kulturerbes untersuchen soll (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat 2024: 27, 36 Maßnahme Nr. 12). Auch in Deutschland wurde ein Ratgeber mit Handlungsempfehlungen für Krisen-Notsituationen jüngst überarbeitet und neu aufgelegt. Er erschien 2025 und führt neben Ereignissen die „[...] unsere gewohnten alltäglichen Abläufe stören“, darunter extreme Wetterereignisse, Cyberattacken, Desinformation oder Sabotage, auch an: „Selbst ein Krieg scheint nicht mehr so ausgeschlossen wie noch vor einigen Jahren“ (Bundesamt für Bevölkerungsschutz und Katastrophenhilfe 2025). Auf seiner Homepage informiert das herausgebende Bundesamt für Bevölkerungsschutz und Katastrophenhilfe (BBK) explizit über die Gründe dafür, dass Krieg in der im Ton völlig sachlich gehaltenen Broschüre aufgegriffen wurde: Es seien eine vermehrte Nachfrage von Bürgerinnen und Bürgern sowie Erhebungen gewesen, die ergaben, dass Menschen sich Informationen und Vorbereitungsempfehlungen zu diesem Thema wünschten (BBK 2026). Das Vorgehen unterscheidet sich also stark von dem schwedischen.

Kulturgut im Kriegsfall zuständig – ansonsten liegt die Verantwortung für Kultur und Kulturgüter maßgeblich bei den Ländern und Kommunen und diese föderale Trennung war eine bewusste Reaktion auf die zentral gesteuerte Instrumentalisierung der Kulturpolitik im Nationalsozialismus (Heinicke 2025; Geier 2021). In beispielhaft für die Länder konsultierten Publikationen aus Baden-Württemberg, die sich mit Resilienz beschäftigen, wird zwar Identität erwähnt, jedoch wenig dazu ausgeführt und es findet sich auch kaum ein Hinweis auf die Verbindung von Kulturerbe und Identität (Janoschka u. a. 2024; Ministerium für Landesentwicklung und Wohnen 2023). „Erhaltung und Schutz bedeutsamer Kulturdenkmale als prägende Elemente der Landschaft“ wird in den Eckpunkten für den Landesentwicklungsplan im Handlungsfeld „Freizeit, Erholung und Tourismus“ behandelt (Ministerium für Landesentwicklung und Wohnen 2023). Eine Trennung von Sicherheitspolitik, Zivil- und Katastrophenschutz und Kulturerbe scheint in Deutschland also weiterhin gegeben zu sein.

Neben strukturellen Gegebenheiten stellt das Bewusstsein des Missbrauchs von Kultur und Kulturerbe im Nationalsozialismus im Zusammenspiel mit der Bedeutung der deutschen Erinnerungspolitik beziehungsweise dem kulturpolitischen Fokus auf Erinnerungskultur in Deutschland eine erhebliche Hürde dar, die einem unwidersprochenen Übergang von einem universalistischen Verständnis von ‚Welterbe‘ zu Kulturerbe als identitätsstiftendem Instrument für eine nationalistische Schließung nach innen oder gar in Vorbereitung auf einen Kriegsfall, wie das nach Holtorfs Ausführungen für Schweden der Fall ist, (zumindest noch) unmöglich erscheinen lässt.

So sehr dies lange Zeit eine unverrückbare Selbstverständlichkeit gewesen sein mag, so wenig selbstverständlich ist es allerdings, dass das auch in Zukunft so bleibt. Ausgrenzende Konzepte einer ‚Leitkultur‘ werden bereits seit längerem einem Paradigma der Vielfalt entgegengestellt (Heinicke 2025). Ein linksliberales Weltbild als Norm ist nicht mehr selbstverständlich und dass ein Kulturkampf von rechts stattfindet steht außer Frage, auch wenn diskutiert wird, wie erfolgreich er tatsächlich ist (Strauß 2025). Bisher handelt es sich größtenteils um gesellschaftliche Aushandlungsprozesse, in denen politisch gesetzte Narrative eine Rolle spielen. Wie schnell diese Narrative exekutiv in Maßnahmen umgesetzt werden könnten und wie massiv dies auch den Kulturbereich ändern würde, sobald sie Mehrheiten hätten, hatten bereits ein das Bauhaus diffamierender Antrag der AfD-Fraktion in Sachsen-Anhalt im Oktober 2024 (Drucksache 8/4681, 15.10.2024) und ein Antrag derselben Fraktion zu einer Kampagne #deutschdenken im Mai 2025, mit der sie Sachsen-Anhalt „[...] eine Führungsrolle bei der anstehenden kulturpolitischen Wende“ zuweisen wollte (Drucksache 8/5478, 06.05.2025), unmissverständlich verdeutlicht.³ Diese muten jedoch gegenüber der Deutlichkeit des unterdessen öffentlichen Entwurfs der AfD Sachsen-Anhalt für ein „Regierungsprogramm“ zur Landtagswahl 2026 beinahe harmlos an. In dem Programm stehen unter anderem folgende Sätze, die völlig abgesehen vom Wahlausgang im September aufrütteln sollten:

„Eine Tradition der Traditionsvernichtung hat, von der 68er-Bewegung ausgehend, unser kulturelles Erbe entkernt und damit Möglichkeiten einer stabilen nationalen Identitätsbildung verbaut. Seiner Selbstbehauptungskräfte beraubt, ist Deutschland dem Einfluss der Regenbogenideologie hilflos ausgeliefert. Die AfD-Sachsen-Anhalt wird diese Identitätsstörung durch eine neue, patriotische Kulturpolitik heilen. Die Kulturpolitik muss den Deutschen ihr Selbstbewusstsein zurückgeben. Wir werden durch gezielte Maßnahmen und Bezugnahmen auf die guten Seiten der deutschen Geschichte eine unverkrampften und auf gesunde Weise selbstbewusste deutsche Identität fördern.“ (<https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/25/Document-AfD-Regierungsprogramm-2026.pdf>, S. 45 Z. 1302–1313; Stand 31.01.2026)

Insgesamt ist festzuhalten, dass der Kulturerbebereich nicht im luftleeren Raum zu sehen ist, sondern eingebunden ist in politische und gesellschaftliche Entwicklungen. Die Beschäftigung mit den Potenzialen von Kulturerbe für positive Zukünfte zum Wohle aller (!) Menschen sollte deshalb ebenso nicht für sich stehen, sondern als ein Teil zur Stärkung der Demokratie beziehungsweise zur Zurückdrängung demokratiegefährdender Strömungen in Politik und Gesellschaft begriffen werden.

Entsprechend wäre es meines Erachtens nicht nur sinnvoll, sondern geboten, sowohl den akademischen Diskurs zur Frage, wie Kulturerbe zum Wohle von Menschen beitragen kann, als auch die praktische Beschäftigung mit ‚Heritage Futures‘ nicht abgekapselt zu führen, sondern breit den Schulterschluss zu suchen mit anderen Disziplinen, Personen, Verbänden und Organisationen, die sich aus ihrer jeweiligen Perspektive heraus für den Schutz der Demokratie einsetzen.

3 Die AfD Sachsen-Anhalt ist der Landesverband der rechtspopulistischen Partei Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) im Land Sachsen-Anhalt. Er wird vom Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz Sachsen-Anhalt seit November 2023 als gesichert rechtsextrem eingestuft, <https://mi.sachsen-anhalt.de/verfassungsschutz/themenfelder/rechtsextremismus/rechtsextremistische-parteien>, Stand 22.03.2026.

Bibliografie

- Auswärtiges Amt. 2023. Wehrhaft. Resilient. Nachhaltig. Integrierte Sicherheit für Deutschland. Nationale Sicherheitsstrategie. Berlin. <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/Sicherheitsstrategie-DE.pdf>. Stand 20.02.2025.
- Bundesamt für Bevölkerungsschutz und Katastrophenhilfe (BBK). 2012. Schutz von Kulturgut bei bewaffneten Konflikten. 7. Aufl. https://www.bbk.bund.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Mediathek/Publikationen/Kulturgutschutz/schutz-von-kulturgut-bei-bewaffneten-konflikten.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=5. Stand 08.02.2026.
- Bundesamt für Bevölkerungsschutz und Katastrophenhilfe (BBK). 2025. Vorsorgen für Krisen und Katastrophen. Bonn. 2. Aufl. https://www.bbk.bund.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Mediathek/Publikationen/Buergerinformationen/Ratgeber/BBK-Vorsorgen-fuer-Krisen-und-Katastrophen.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=41. Stand 04.03.2026.
- Bundesamt für Bevölkerungsschutz und Katastrophenhilfe (BBK). 2026. Homepage. https://www.bbk.bund.de/DE/Warnung-Vorsorge/Vorsorge/Ratgeber-Checkliste/ratgeber-checkliste_node.html. Stand 08.02.2026.
- Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat (BMI). 2022. Deutsche Strategie zur Stärkung der Resilienz gegenüber Katastrophen. Umsetzung des Sendai Rahmenwerks für Katastrophenvorsorge (2015–2030) – Der Beitrag Deutschlands 2022–2030. Berlin. https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/publikationen/themen/bevoelkerungsschutz/BMI22017-resilienz-katastrophen.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=3. Stand 20.02.2026.
- Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat (BMI). 2024. Umsetzungsplan der Deutschen Strategie zur Stärkung der Resilienz gegenüber Katastrophen. Berlin. https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/publikationen/themen/bevoelkerungsschutz/BMI24017-umsetzungsplan-resilienz.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=3. Stand 22.03.2026.
- Bundesregierung. 2023. Pressemitteilung zur Veröffentlichung der Nationalen Sicherheitsstrategie. 14. Juni 2023. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/nationale-sicherheitsstrategie-2195890>. Stand 20.02.2026.
- Deutschlandfunk Nova. 2026. Homepage Podcast „Hörsaal“. <https://www.deutschlandfunknova.de/beitrag/preparedness-vorsorgen-fuer-die-katastrophe>. Stand 06.02.2026.
- Geier, Wolfram. 2021. Strukturen, Akteure und Zuständigkeiten des deutschen Bevölkerungsschutzes. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 71(10–11): 16–22. https://www.bpb.de/system/files/dokument_pdf/APuZ_2021-10-11_online.pdf. Stand 09.01.2026.
- Heinicke, Julius. 2025. Kulturpolitik in der Bundesrepublik. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 75(49): 10–16. https://www.bpb.de/system/files/dokument_pdf/APuZ_2025-49_online_Kulturpolitik.pdf. Stand 20.02.2026.
- Hilgert, Markus. 2019. „Why Culture Matters. The Impact of Culture and Cultural Heritage on Societal Challenges and Sustainable Development“, Vortrag gehalten im Yarmouk Cultural Center, Kuwait. Kulturstiftung der Länder, Homepage Rubrik Kulturpolitik. <https://www.kulturstiftung.de/why-culture-matters/> und https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_n7wnMotDI. Stand 22.03.2026.
- Holtorf, Cornelius. 2026. Alternative Futures: How Can Cultural Heritage Be Mobilized for Peace Rather than War? *Forum Kritische Archäologie* 15, Controversy: Alternative Futures: 25–36. DOI: 10.17169/refubium-52134.
- Janoschka, Michael, Marion Hitzeroth und Steven Ross. 2024: *Resilienz der ländlichen Räume in Baden-Württemberg. Ein Konzept*. Endbericht. Projekt im Rahmen der interministeriellen Arbeitsgruppe „Resiliente Ländliche Räume“ des Kabinettsausschusses Ländlicher Raum. Karlsruhe.
- Marwecki, Daniel. 2025. *Die Welt nach dem Westen. Über die Neuordnung der Macht im 21. Jahrhundert*. Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag.

- Ministerium für Landesentwicklung und Wohnen Baden-Württemberg. 2023. Raum für morgen. Eckpunkte für den neuen Landesentwicklungsplan Baden-Württemberg. Stuttgart. <https://img.mlw.oneba.se/s5B790Nx0V4ahlKiFqhpAO3NXQvFw6UHvSb2WqiBqS6k=/https://www.landesentwicklung-bw.de/img/stream/content/downloads/lep-raum-fuer-morgen-eckpunktetpapier.pdf,p15>. Stand 09.01.2026.
- Rühle, Alex. 2024. Krieg und Nudeln. Konfrontation mit Russland. *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 27.11.2024. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/schweden-finnland-norwegen-broschueren-ernstfall-unterschied-lux.8AEuGZixYnTkygwfmvkihd?reduced=true>. Stand 23.01.2026.
- Strauß, Simon. 2025. Kulturrepublik Deutschland. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 75(49): 4–9. https://www.bpb.de/system/files/dokument_pdf/APuZ_2025-49_online_Kulturpolitik.pdf. Stand 20.02.2026.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. 2001 [1945]. Verfassung der Organisation für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur (UNESCO). <https://www.unesco.de/dokumente-und-hintergruende/dokumente/unesco/verfassung-der-organisation-fuer-bildung-wissenschaft-und-kultur/>. Stand 20.02.2026.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). 1972. Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Adopted by the General Conference at its seventeenth session Paris, 16 november 1972. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000002091>. Stand 20.02.2026.
- United Nations Inter-Agency Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR). 2015. Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030. Genf. <https://www.undrr.org/media/16176/download?startDownload=20260207>. Stand 07.02.2026.
- United Nations Inter-Agency Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR). 2005. Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015. Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disaster. Genf. <https://www.unisdr.org/2005/wcdr/intergover/official-doc/L-docs/Hyogo-framework-for-action-english.pdf>. Stand 20.02.2026.
- United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR). 2026a. DRR and UNDRR’s History. <https://www.undrr.org/our-work/history>. Stand 20.02.2026.
- United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR). 2026b. A Walk Through DRR History. The Early Experiences and Works of the Disaster Risk Reduction Pioneers. <https://www.preventionweb.net/hubs/walk-though-history-disaster-risk-reduction>. Stand 20.02.2026.
- Voges, Jonathan. 2025a. „Für den Notfall vorgesorgt“. Preparedness als Zugriff auf die Zukunft“. Vortrag im Rahmen des Institutskolloquium des Leibniz-Zentrums für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam (ZZF) Potsdam, gehalten am 16.10.2025. Veröffentlicht in der Podcast-Folge „Hörsaal“ von Deutschlandfunk Nova am 01.01.2026. <https://www.deutschlandfunknova.de/beitrag/preparedness-vorsorgen-fuer-die-ka-tastrophe>. Stand 30.01.2026.
- Voges, Jonathan. 2025b. Priv.-Doz. Jonathan Voges. Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter (Mitarbeiterprofil). https://zzf-potsdam.de/institut/personen/mitarbeiter_innen/jonathan-voges. Stand 06.02.2026.
- Voges, Jonathan. 2025c. „Are you ready?“ Preparedness als Zugriff auf die Zukunft seit den 1990er Jahren (Projektbeschreibung). <https://zzf-potsdam.de/forschung/projekte/are-you-ready-preparedness-als-zugriff-auf-die-zukunft-seit-den-1990er-jahren>. Stand 06.02.2026.

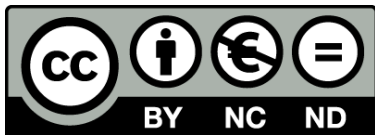
Response to *Alternative Futures: How Can Cultural Heritage Be Mobilized for Peace Rather than War?*: Building Resilience and Peace with Knowledge, not Rhetorics

Anna McWilliams

Zitiervorschlag

McWilliams, Anna. 2026. Response to *Alternative Futures: How Can Cultural Heritage Be Mobilized for Peace Rather than War?*: Building Resilience and Peace with Knowledge, not Rhetorics. Forum Kritische Archäologie 15, Controversy: Alternative Futures: 44–45.

URL <https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de>
DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-52174>
ISSN 2194-346X



Dieser Beitrag steht unter der Creative Commons Lizenz CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 (Namensnennung – Nicht kommerziell – Keine Bearbeitung) International. Sie erlaubt den Download und die Weiterverteilung des Werkes / Inhaltes unter Nennung des Namens des*der Autor*in, jedoch keinerlei Bearbeitung oder kommerzielle Nutzung.

Weitere Informationen zu der Lizenz finden Sie unter: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>.

Response to *Alternative Futures: How Can Cultural Heritage Be Mobilized for Peace Rather than War?*: Building Resilience and Peace with Knowledge, not Rhetorics

Anna McWilliams

FOI, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, Sweden

Cornelius Holtorf's focus on how to make peace possible is a welcome break from the doom and gloom of the current geopolitical climate where the question of peace is surprisingly absent. As is clear from the article, knowledge of how history and heritage is used is not always so well known outside our own sector. This is also something that has become very clear in my own work in the field, especially since the full-scale invasion by Russia in 2022.

This issue can be tackled in different ways. It is my belief, however, that lecturing others for their lack of knowledge is not the most productive. As a researcher at the Swedish Defence Research Agency,¹ my work involves building knowledge of the connection between cultural heritage and conflict for the heritage sector as well as for the total defence. An important part of my role is to question and problematise statements in policy documents and other grey literature and to build knowledge in the field in order to avoid conflicts or misunderstandings. Another part of my role is to build bridges between different actors and sectors that are not used to working together but who, as part of the total defence, are required to do so. As Marie Elisabeth Berg Christensen (2023) points out, actors such as museums have now ended up in an area of securitisation which places them in a context different than that which they are used to. It takes a lot of effort to make different groups and people understand each other's work. A kind of bureaucratic diplomacy, if you will, in the everyday workings of actors within the total defence.

This does not mean researchers should not be critical. Quite the opposite. Here the universities and independent researchers have an especially important role to both critically examine the goings on within the heritage sector as well as the total defence and to provide new knowledge to inform future decisions and strategies. Research is also imperative in pointing out new directions, something which Holtorf does well in his article, describing alternative approaches towards new possible futures. Shifting the focus from preservation of heritage towards developing work to prevent conflict is an excellent way that archaeologists and heritage professionals can help movement towards peace. Research into the use of cultural heritage in social sustainability, already an established field in which Holtorf himself has made great contributions, is one such example that could also be applied in connection with conflict. I am also in total agreement with Holtorf's concern that the securitisation of heritage in Sweden appears to have led to a return to a more object-centred approach, focusing more on protection of a few objects than a more inclusive focus on the people who value different heritage. This, together with a national agenda can lead us down dark paths when it comes to using heritage as part of a national identity agenda. This kind of instrumentalisation of heritage therefore needs to be understood in order to avoid pitfalls that the past has already shown us to be detrimental.

We do have to understand, however, that instrumentalisation of heritage can be the result of both good or bad intentions. Here, again, research is needed to better understand the processes of how and when heritage becomes a tool in society in order to fulfil a particular purpose or an agenda. In Holtorf's words, "How can we employ

1 The Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) is an independent government research agency, which carries out research connected to total defence, i.e. both military and civil defence.

cultural heritage to serve other agendas” (Holtorf 2026: 30). This does not mean that heritage cannot be part of work towards peace, but we do need to understand the processes involved and that consequences can be different than the intentions that set them in motion. I look forward to more research into these questions, as it is an area that is currently lacking knowledge.

As much as I agree with the main purpose of Holtorf’s article I do have to point out, however, that some of the arguments in his paper are based on scientifically shaky grounds. Major weight is placed on one statement made from one person working at the Swedish Contingencies Agency (from 1 January 2026 called the Swedish Civil Defence and Resilience Agency) describing heritage in connection to “flesh and blood.” I do not contest bringing this statement to light nor am I in any way justifying this statement, which is at best severely misinformed or at worst a reference to Nazi rhetoric. It is important that this kind of rhetoric is brought to light and questioned. What I do see as problematic, however, is how Holtorf takes this statement as a foundation for arguing that “it appears to be the current Swedish policy that protecting the safety of archaeological collections and drawing on stories about the past will strengthen the will to defend the country with arms in the name of sovereignty, national identity and “flesh and blood” (Holtorf 2026: 30). This is in effect saying that the whole of the Swedish policy is based on the notion of “flesh and blood,” and that is just not correct. I appreciate that this may help Holtorf’s argument (however sloppy it is from an academic point of view), but if he truly wants to contribute to a change of Swedish policies and of attitudes towards heritage in Sweden (and beyond) then I do not believe arguments based on misleading information will get him further. I also question the statement he makes in reference to Sweden and Finland joining NATO, in which he claims that “after decades of maintaining stability in the region by staying outside” (Holtorf 2026: 25) there is no way of knowing to what extent Swedish and Finnish neutrality led to peace in the region since the end of World War II and whether we would have had a different situation if they had joined NATO earlier. This is in itself a kind of rhetoric in which the author is trying to further his agenda based on questionable arguments. These kinds of statements are exactly what I spend a lot of my time trying to question; I advocate building solid knowledge instead of getting stuck in rhetoric that is aimed more at furthering an agenda (whether from good or bad intentions) than using science to build knowledge.

With that said, I am in complete agreement with Holtorf that we need to expand our view of what futures can lie ahead and move from an object-centred towards a people-centred understanding of cultural heritage in connection with both war and peace in order to create more socially and culturally sustainable societies. This is an area where knowledge needs to be increased, and I am excited to hear more from Holtorf on how we can focus on avoiding conflict and on peace in a climate currently caught in the headlights of the threat of war.

References

- Berg Christensen, Marie Elisabeth. 2023. The Museum Sector as an Actor in Human Security. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 29(8): 822–836. DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2023.2220296.
- Holtorf, Cornelius. 2026. Alternative Futures: How Can Cultural Heritage Be Mobilized for Peace Rather than War? *Forum Kritische Archäologie* 15, Controversy: Alternative Futures: 25–36. DOI: 10.17169/refubium-52134.

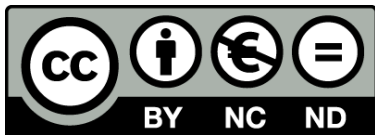
When Heritage Goes to War – A Response to Cornelius Holtorf

Anatolijs Venovcevs

Zitiervorschlag

Venovcevs, Anatolijs. 2026. When Heritage Goes to War – A Response to Cornelius Holtorf. Forum Kritische Archäologie 15, Controversy: Alternative Futures: 46–53.

URL	https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-52175
ISSN	2194-346X



Dieser Beitrag steht unter der Creative Commons Lizenz CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 (Namensnennung – Nicht kommerziell – Keine Bearbeitung) International. Sie erlaubt den Download und die Weiterverteilung des Werkes / Inhaltes unter Nennung des Namens des*der Autor*in, jedoch keinerlei Bearbeitung oder kommerzielle Nutzung.

Weitere Informationen zu der Lizenz finden Sie unter: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>.

When Heritage Goes to War – A Response to Cornelius Holtorf

Anatolijs Venovcevs

Svalbard Museum, Longyearbyen, Norway, anatolijs@svalbardmuseum.no

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’s¹ 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 toponymy – 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 *microrraion* 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 2021³; 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).

children⁶ – 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 Riksantikvarens 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=1IuAd4rd5hB-ybRG&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.

References

- Ahonen, Anneli, Arsalan Bilal, Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv, Juris Jurāns, Martin Kragh, Kristofers Kārlis Krūmiņš, Elina Lange-Ionatamishvili, et al. 2023. *Russia’s Information Influence Operations in the Nordic – Baltic Region*. Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.
- Arlov, Thor B. 2003. *Svalbards Historie*. Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk Forlag.
- DeSilvey, Caitlin. 2017. *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- González-Ruibal, Alfredo, Pablo Alonso González, and Felipe Criado-Boado. 2018. Against Reactionary Populism: Towards a New Public Archaeology. *Antiquity* 92(362): 507–515. DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2017.227.
- Hansen, Tiril Vold. 2025. Power and Interests in Environmental Policy Processes: The Svalbard Case. *Environmental Sociology* 11(1): 1–11. DOI: 10.1080/23251042.2024.2385544.
- Holtorf, Cornelius. 2026. Alternative Futures: How Can Cultural Heritage Be Mobilized for Peace Rather than War? *Forum Kritische Archäologie* 15, Controversy: Alternative Futures: 25–36. DOI: 10.17169/refubium-52134.

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

- Hultgreen, Tora. 2003. *Den Russiske Fangen på Svalbard: En Reanalyse av Arkeologiske og Historiske Kilder*. PhD dissertation, Department of Archaeology, University of Tromsø.
- Hultgreen, Tora. 2005. The Chronology of the Russian Hunting Stations on Svalbard: A Reconsideration. *Acta Borealia* 22(1): 79–91. DOI: 10.1080/08003830510020398.
- Kasianov, Georgiy. 2025. History Politics in the Russian – Ukrainian Relations, the 2000s–2022: Shared Past as a Casus Belli. *Nationalities Papers* (First View): 1–26. DOI: 10.1017/nps.2025.24.
- Klopotenko, Yevhen. 2022. *Culture of Ukrainian Borscht Cooking*. List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding: Case of Extreme Urgency. UNESCO.
- Kolstø, Pål. 2023. Ukrainians and Russians as ‘One People’: An Ideologeme and its Genesis. *Ethnopolitics* 24(2): 139–158. DOI: 10.1080/17449057.2023.2247664.
- Kruse, Frigga. 2016. Is Svalbard a Pristine Ecosystem? Reconstructing 420 Years of Human Presence in an Arctic Archipelago. *Polar Record* 52(5): 518–534. DOI: 10.1017/s0032247416000309.
- Kuzio, Taras. 2024. Ukrainian versus Pan-Russian Identities: The Roots of Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 24(3): 234–257. DOI: 10.1111/sena.12422.
- Lahusen, Thomas. 2006. Decay or Endurance? The Ruins of Socialism. *Slavic Review* 65(4): 736–746. DOI: 10.2307/4148452.
- Meuser, Philipp and Dimitrij Zadorin. 2015. *Toward a Topology of Soviet Mass Housing: Prefabrication in the USSR 1955–1991*. Berlin: DOM Publishers.
- Mick, Christoph. 2023. The Fight for the Past: Contested Heritage and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice* 14(2): 135–153. DOI: 10.1080/17567505.2023.2205703.
- Moe, Arild and Anne-Kristin Jørgensen. 2025. Russia’s policy of presence in Svalbard. *Polar Record* 61: Art. e11. DOI: 10.1017/s003224742500004x.
- Myklebost, Kari Aga, Stian Bones, and Thomas Nilsen. 2025a. *Hybrid Threats in High Latitudes: Facing Russia on Svalbard*. Hybrid CoE Paper 26. Helsinki: The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats.
- Myklebost, Kari Aga, Håvard Bækken, and Stian Bones, eds. 2025b. The Politics of World War II Memories in the North. Special issue: *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 11(2).
- Ødegaard, Cecilie Vindal. 2022. Returning to Nature: Post-carbon Utopias in Svalbard, Norway. *Social Analysis* 66(2): 1–22. DOI: 10.3167/sa.2022.660201.
- Okovantsev, Vladimir S., Georgy Y. Ponomarev, Anastasiya T. Agdzhoyan, Anna T. Agdzhoyan, Vladimir Y. Pylev, and Elena V. Balanovska. 2022. Peculiarity of Pomors of Onega Peninsula and Winter Coast in the Genetic Context of Northern Europe. *Bulletin of Russian State Medical University* 2022(5): 5–14. DOI: 10.24075/brsmu.2022.046.
- Olsen, Bjørnar and Svetlana Vinogradova. 2019. (In)significantly Soviet: The Heritage of Teriberka. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 26(9): 901–918. DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2019.1620831.
- Pétursdóttir, Þóra. 2014. Things Out of Hand: The Aesthetics of Abandonment. In Bjørnar Julius Olsen and Þóra Pétursdóttir, eds.: *Ruin Memories: Materiality, Aesthetics and the Archaeology of the Recent Past*, pp. 335–364. London: Routledge.
- Putin, Vladimir. 2021. On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>. 12 July, 2021. Last viewed 21.01.2026.
- Seitsonen, Oula. 2025. Conflict Heritage in the Cold: Traces of Second World War and Cold War in the High Arctic Svalbard Archipelago. In Ihab Saloul and Britt Baillie, eds.: *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Cultural Heritage and Conflict*, pp. 1–15. Cham: Palgrave. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-61493-5_84-1.

- Shekhovtsov, Anton, ed. 2023. *Russian Political Warfare: Essays on Kremlin Propaganda in Europe and the Neighbourhood, 2020–2023*. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag.
- Sokolíčková, Zdenka. 2023. *The Paradox of Svalbard: Climate Change and Globalisation in the Arctic*. London: Pluto Press.
- Starkov, Vadim F. 1993. Russian Sites on Spitsbergen. In Polar Club of the Polish Geographical Society, ed.: *XX Polar Symposium: Man Impact on Polar Environment*, pp. 103–109. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS.
- Starkov, Vadim F. 2005. Methods of Russian Heritage Site Dating on the Spitsbergen Archipelago. *Acta Borealia* 22(1): 63–78. DOI: 10.1080/08003830510020389.
- (Svalbard Treaty). 1920. Treaty between Norway, The United States of America, Denmark, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Great Britain and Ireland and the British overseas Dominions and Sweden concerning Spitsbergen signed in Paris 9th February 1920. Paris, France.
- Venovcevs, Anatolijs. 2025. Between Use and Abandonment: An Archaeology of Mothballing. In Bjørnar Julius Olsen, Stein Farstadvoll, and Geneviève Godin, eds.: *Unruly Heritage: Archaeologies of the Anthropocene*, pp. 143–161. London: Bloombury Academic.
- Weiner, Douglas R. 2009. The Predatory Tribute-Taking State: A Framework for Understanding Russian Environmental History. In Edward Burke and Kenneth Pomeranz, eds.: *The Environment and World History*, pp. 276–315. Oakland: University of California Press.

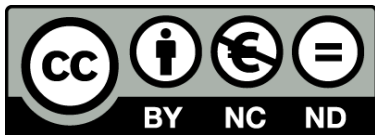
Mobilizing Cultural Heritage for Peace or for War? Note on the Necessity to Reflect on Terms and Implicit Normative Assumptions

Hans P. Hahn

Zitiervorschlag

Hahn, Hans P. 2026. Mobilizing Cultural Heritage for Peace or for War? Note on the Necessity to Reflect on Terms and Implicit Normative Assumptions. Forum Kritische Archäologie 15, Controversy: Alternative Futures: 54–56.

URL <https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de>
DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-52176>
ISSN 2194-346X



Dieser Beitrag steht unter der Creative Commons Lizenz CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 (Namensnennung – Nicht kommerziell – Keine Bearbeitung) International. Sie erlaubt den Download und die Weiterverteilung des Werkes / Inhaltes unter Nennung des Namens des*der Autor*in, jedoch keinerlei Bearbeitung oder kommerzielle Nutzung.

Weitere Informationen zu der Lizenz finden Sie unter: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>.

Mobilizing Cultural Heritage for Peace or for War? Note on the Necessity to Reflect on Terms and Implicit Normative Assumptions

Hans P. Hahn

Institut für Ethnologie, Goethe Universität, Frankfurt a. M., hans.hahn@em.uni-frankfurt.de

Cornelius Holtorf's text describes a hotly debated issue that is currently the subject of political debate in many countries around the world. The text also demonstrates the author's sensitivity to problematic, if not inadmissible, simplifications. He succeeds in demonstrating how short-sighted the Swedish national cultural heritage claims are that he quotes. Furthermore, it is obvious that alternatives to such reckless claims should not focus on cultural heritage objects but rather on the well-being of people. With all those statements made by the author, I entirely agree. It is plausible to link this problematic to the one-sidedness and shortcomings in the field of the UNESCO's World Heritage Programme. Criticism of this UNESCO programme has been articulated in academia for more than thirty years. The problematic simplifications of this programme and its implicit reproduction of global power imbalances, which were often uncritically accepted in the 1950s, can no longer be considered scientific standard or ethically acceptable. It goes without saying that a definition from the year 1954 of what a cultural phenomenon is should be under critical revision more than 70 years later.

With this criticism, the plea by Holtorf could be read as beating a dead horse. It is a criticism of procedures and categorisations that might be still in use politically (and also popular) but that has long since ceased to be recognised in the academic world. As honourable as the author's plea for a perspective of "cultural heritage for all" may appear at first glance, the way that the text deals with the fundamental phenomenon of "heritage" is utterly vague. When we talk about cultural heritage, we must first explain what the historical and social reference is and what dynamics of evaluation, not to say revaluation, exist. Identification with an object from the past or with a monument is always also a process that goes hand-in-hand with a logic of exclusion. Usually I apply here the term 'heritagisation' (Salemink 2016; Müller and Wille 2019, Hahn 2024b), which describes a transformation in which the referent (= the cultural heritage object) is homogenised and exclusivity attributed to a collective of people that identifies with it. A cultural heritage that develops a dynamic of identification on an equal footing "for all", as suggested by Holtorf, is a utopian idea. To the contrary, cultural heritage is almost always a proxy for marking boundaries and exclusion. Cultural heritage creates inequality and erects walls.

The starting point for the author's criticism is a talk given in 2023 at the annual meeting of the Swedish Museum Association. The speaker equates cultural heritage with the "flesh and blood of the Swedish people". Of course, this is scandalous and should not be tolerated under any circumstances! It is misleading in its content and dangerous as a guiding principle. But at the same time, it must be emphasised that such simplifications are part and parcel of UNESCO's cultural heritage (Rodwell 2012).¹ As a matter of fact, the concept of cultural heritage has always been more complex than this policy might make politicians believe.

1 <https://whc.unesco.org/en/faq/19> (21.03.2026).

The question of identification with a particular monument or object, usually originating in the past, is a fundamental feature of symbolic politics. This also means that such equations represent nothing other than a politically supported reference to such a symbolic structure, but, at the same time, such problematic equations are the one and only fundamental concept of cultural heritage. People identify with objects, monuments, or landscapes of the past in order to create exclusivity. It is a form of exclusion with reference to those people who do not have access to this symbolic identification (but presumably to another symbol).

Holtorf's most important reference in the context of his plea for establishing a new cultural heritage policy is Amin Maalouf (2003 [1998]). This short essay, first published in French in 1998 (*L'identité meurtrière*) and subsequently translated into many other languages and reprinted repeatedly to this day, is not a description of any existing policy, but rather a manifesto and, at the same time, an indictment of the harmful effects of identity. As convincing as his argument might be, it is nevertheless a misunderstanding to describe Maalouf's position as a real, existing, and applicable policy. This was not the case when the essay was written at the end of the 20th century, nor is it the case more than a quarter of a century later, in the context of Holtorf's text.

This is not to deny the specific value of Maalouf's essay. But instead of deriving from it a new cultural heritage policy, it is more useful to examine his basic concepts in more detail. For example, his idea that the appreciation of a cultural heritage object is conditioned by its attribution as being outside the present, i.e. stemming from the pre-modern era, is helpful. The genesis of cultural heritage is always beyond the reach of contemporaries and is thus stylised as something unavailable in the present (2003 [1998]: 71–82). The capacity to serve as a source of identification, (exclusive) access rights, and the privileges derived from them are also the subject of an important essay by Arjun Appadurai with the memorable title *Fear of Small Numbers* (2006). In it, the well-known globalisation theorist describes the rise of 'small groups' that remain below the level of the nation state and claim certain privileges against the nation state on the basis of religion or other inherited cultural characteristics. In addition to the threat to the nation state posed by global trends and currents, there is also the questioning of state authority by groups that use other structures of identification. This highlights the necessary differentiation of the principle of 'identification with cultural heritage'. People use (old) things to reposition themselves, to create exclusive communities, and to defend privileges.

So far, so disappointing when we take a closer look at the role of cultural heritage in postmodern society. But it is also valuable information to see how wide the spectrum of reference levels is in the area of such symbolic projections that we may label as 'heritage with identity assignment'. The example that sparked Holtorf's criticism is just one, and as a matter of fact a relatively abstract one that can by no means be considered typical of how cultural heritage is dealt with in more general terms. In fact, it is possible to identify collective references to cultural heritage on the level of families, small local communities, religious communities, up to regional and transnational groups. The dangerous equation of a nation state with a particular cultural heritage may be particularly politically explosive, but it does not reflect the range of the highly heterogeneous constellations that repeatedly arise in cultural heritage practice.

In my opinion, awareness of the heterogeneity of constellations and the widespread experience that small groups are generally unable to assert their expected privileges or even to generate a general appreciation for the cultural heritage associated with them is more effective in terms of supporting a reflexive approach to cultural heritage than the general plea for universalistic, or in Holtorf's words, a 'for all'-oriented cultural heritage policy.

In order to do justice to the spectrum of different practices, we need even more complexity. What about cultural heritage that is not suitable for immediate identification, for example? What about memorials to war, violence, suppression, and tyranny, such as the concentration camp memorials in Central Europe or the slave forts in West Africa? Few will question the value of these monuments, but they oblige us to broaden the concept of cultural heritage and, at the same time, to reflect to such an extent that immediate identification becomes a special case.

The political trap of strategically appropriating national cultural heritage to increase the willingness to engage in violent conflict is a real danger. Holtorf's contribution deserves credit for pointing out the current increase in such

dubious symbolic politics. At the same time, however, his essay substantially underestimates the broad range of different cultural heritage phenomena and the sensitivity of historical contexts, which in many cases make direct identification impossible. The broad field of local (sometimes religious) items transformed into cultural artefacts in colonial contexts illustrates the difficulty of simple and direct identification. Understanding cultural heritage in its broadest sense, with all its different manifestations, always implies a call for a differentiated view of society and respect for diversity. Jonatan Kurzwelly uses the somewhat ironic term of “calcified identities” in order to highlight the difficult relationship between the colonial actors who preserved the items (in this case the bones) and legitimate owners of this heritage (Kurzwelly and Wilckens 2023). Is such a heritage a privilege or rather a legacy? We should never underestimate the ambivalences of heritage (Hahn 2024a).

It is this precise view of the individual and, as a rule in each individual case, different forms of cultural heritage that makes me optimistic about the mobilization of cultural heritage for peace and not for war. Taking into account the role of symbolic politics, it is possible to derive from cultural heritage an attitude to society that encompasses respect and recognition of diversity and the pursuit of a peaceful future. Fifteen years ago, the *Association for Critical Heritage Studies* (ACHS) was founded (<https://www.criticalheritagestudies.org/history>, Witcomb and Buckley 2013). This academic network, which is rapidly growing on a global scale, makes similar questions the focus of its activities: exploring the spectrum of different forms of cultural heritage and asking how to manage the things of the past as both a challenge and a recognition of diverse communities, collective representations, etc.

Who among us does not have multiple affiliations? Who among us does not consider certain points of reference to be significant at the level of family, local society, religion, and more? These are the tasks of a contemporary critical reflection on cultural heritage, and in dealing in this manner with heritage, we are still in the very early stages.

References

- Appadurai, Arjun. 2006. *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hahn, Hans P. 2024a. On the Ambiguity of Cultural Heritage: How a Closer Look at Material Objects Undermines Heritage Politics. *CAS Sofia Working Paper Series* 14(4): 16–34.
- Hahn, Hans P. 2024b. Ambivalenzen des Kulturerbes. Dinge, die trennen. In Janna Vogl, Ayşegül Dinççağ Kahveci, Mariam Gegidze, and Pablo Santacana López, eds.: *Dinge, die verbinden*. Schriftenreihe des DFG-Graduiertenkollegs 2227 „Identität und Erbe“ 5, pp. 188–197. Weimar: Bauhaus-Universitätsverlag.
- Kurzwelly, Jonatan and Malin S. Wilckens. 2023. Calcified Identities: Persisting Essentialism in Academic Collections of Human Remains. *Anthropological Theory* 23(1): 100–122. DOI: 10.1177/14634996221133872.
- Maalouf, Amin. 2003 [1998]. *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*. London: Penguin.
- Müller, Katja and Boris Wille. 2019. Materiality and Mobility: Comparative Notes on Heritagisation in the Indian Ocean World. In Burkhard Schnepel and Tansen Sen, eds.: *Travelling Past: The Politics of Cultural Heritage in the Indian Ocean World*. Crossroads – History of Interactions across the Silk Routes 1, pp. 81–106. Leiden: Brill.
- Rodwell, Dennis. 2012. The UNESCO World Heritage Convention, 1972–2012: Reflections and Directions. *The Historic Environment* 3(1): 64–85. DOI: 10.1179/1756750512Z.00000000004.
- Salemink, Oscar. 2016. Described, Inscribed, Written Off: Heritagisation as (Dis)connection. In Philip Taylor, ed.: *Connected and Disconnected in Viet Nam: Remaking Social Relations in a Post-Socialist Nation*. pp. 311–345. Acton: Australian National University.
- Witcomb, Andrea and Kristal Buckley. 2013. Engaging with the Future of ‘Critical Heritage Studies’: Looking Back in Order to Look Forward. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 19(6): 562–578. DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2013.818570.

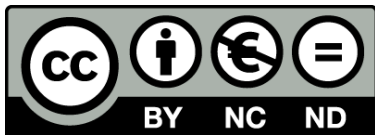
Response to Holtorf's *Alternative Futures*

Laura McAtackney

Zitiervorschlag

McAtackney, Laura. 2026. Response to Holtorf's *Alternative Futures*. Forum Kritische Archäologie 15, Controversy: Alternative Futures: 57–58.

URL	https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-52177
ISSN	2194-346X



Dieser Beitrag steht unter der Creative Commons Lizenz CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 (Namensnennung – Nicht kommerziell – Keine Bearbeitung) International. Sie erlaubt den Download und die Weiterverteilung des Werkes / Inhaltes unter Nennung des Namens des*der Autor*in, jedoch keinerlei Bearbeitung oder kommerzielle Nutzung.

Weitere Informationen zu der Lizenz finden Sie unter: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>.

Response to Holtorf's *Alternative Futures*

Laura McAtackney

Department of Archaeology and Co-Director of the Radical Humanities Laboratory, University College Cork, Ireland, laura.mcatackney@ucc.ie

It is always a pleasure to engage with Cornelius Holtorf's provocations regarding cultural heritage, how it is used, and what it means. In this current piece Holtorf is arguing for cultural heritage to be mobilized for peace rather than war and while the context is set against a backdrop of Swedish reactions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the argumentation follows a long-running theme of Holtorf's that argues for cultural heritage to be reconceptualized away from protecting and preserving materials associated with the past. Rather, he argues here that our conceptions of cultural heritage should focus on meaning, the future, and utilized to facilitate peace. While there are many interesting and compelling points in this piece – I especially enjoyed the section on the potential for utilizing heritage for 'future-making' through future literacy, which acknowledges that we do not know what the future will be like and therefore must actively and creatively imagine it as different from the present. Such arguments are based on hope for a better future and in the desire to activate heritage at times of crisis – not to reinforce boundaries and separation – but as 'a future of hope for people'.

Who could argue with such positive sentiments and hopeful aspirations for cultural heritage? For as Holtorf has referenced in this piece, much of the energies of the field of critical heritage studies for the past few decades has been on moving beyond object-focused obsessions with preservation and retention to instead recognise the significance of heritage to people and therefore allowing for it to be open to reinterpretation and changing meaning (including Smith 2006). As articulated by Holtorf, and since the very beginnings of critical heritage studies, it is clear there are real dangers in overfocusing on cultural heritage as old things that create meaningful links between the past and present, as they can be used as tools of nostalgia and nationalistic, political manipulation (including Lowenthal 1985; Wright 1985). But, one of the issues that I have with this paper is how one can recognize the problems of political manipulation of material cultural heritage – at an extreme end in the justification and maintenance of war – without seeing its underlying context: which is that cultural heritage is not intrinsically valuable but its import is largely symbolic, based on values assigned to it in the present, and inherently open to political manipulation. Indeed, its political worth is largely derived from the ability of various political actors – be they statesmen, far right activists, or ministers for heritage – to utilize it as a means of reinforcing collective identity, but also excluding othered identities from the imaginary of the nation. By moving from imagining culture heritage as either a thing or a concept to exploring it on a managerial and structural level, it is clear heritage does not exist in a bubble. Rather it is selectively managed, controlled, preserved, and funded, subject to policy, political interests, and idealisations of the nation that are largely embedded in, and controlled by, the state. If one looks at the context of Sweden, Elisabeth Niklasson and Herdis Hølleland (2018) have convincingly argued that heritage is highly politicised due to the interest of Far Right politicians in using it to shape ever more exclusionary narratives about Scandinavian identity (this has been most successfully executed in Denmark). One does not need to look only at the extremes of heritage being weaponized – or indeed targeted – through acts of war to be able to see how it is also politically active in less extreme and everyday battles of the politics of identity. The inherent politics of heritage, as it exists in contemporary Sweden (and indeed throughout Europe), is not just a legacy of the 19th century but is an active, constituent part of contemporary European identity. It is not a relic of the past but continues to work on various levels to purposefully create collective identities – regional, national, supranational – and in doing so often 'others'

recent migrants while maintaining the borders of Fortress Europe. Whether utilized against refugees or so-called ‘economic migrants’, those who cannot claim depth of ancestry to cultural heritage are everyday victims as much as the nation seeking to weaponize heritage in times of crisis and war. One cannot divorce the politics from heritage by simply diverting it from enabling wars to facilitating peace; the politics of heritage runs much deeper, systemically and structurally, in the European nation-state and Union.

My last point is to reflect on the role of heritage in war and how we must consider its role not only in facilitating violent conflict, but also in maintaining resilience and ‘sumud’ against aggressor states. In the case of Ukraine, but also Gaza, there have been clear and unambiguous attempts by the Russian and Israeli states to target cultural heritage as a means of denying Ukrainian (Baženova 2024) and Palestinian (Al-Houdalieh et al. 2024) connections to place and claims to national identity. In both these cases there is an undeniably material basis to acts of aggression against cultural heritage. We should not distance and neutralize ourselves, as archaeologists or cultural heritage specialists, from the real and unequal consequences of war, especially when one side is undeniably attempting to destroy cultural heritage as a means of facilitating the conquest of land. To deny the asymmetries of these contemporary and ongoing conflicts while arguing for cultural heritage to be used for peace, denies the real significance that material cultural heritage can play in the politics of invasion and potential genocide. Material cultural heritage is not just an empty vessel for meaning to be added to and manipulated, it exists as a contradiction to the claims of invading forces and it plays an important role in maintaining the resolve of the people targeted alongside the museums, universities, and cultural heritage sites. So while I can read Holtorf’s paper with some degree of detached academic interest and understand where he is coming from, I cannot support an argument for a selectively depoliticised critical heritage studies that ignores the inequities of war, the multifaceted role of cultural heritage in violent conflict, and the possibility that cultural heritage can simply be utilized for peace in some apolitical future.

References

- Al-Houdalieh, Salah H., Loay Abu Alsaud, and Ayman Warasneh. 2024. Heritage and Conflict in Gaza. In Ihab Saloul and Britt Baillie, eds.: *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Cultural Heritage and Conflict*, pp. 1–17. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-61493-5_122-1.
- Baženova, Hanna. 2024. Genocidal Dimensions of the Russo-Ukrainian War: Targeting the People and Cultural Heritage of Ukraine. *Genocidas Ir Rezistencija* 2(56): 218–236. DOI: 10.61903/GR.2024.213.
- Lowenthal, David. 1985. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Niklasson, Elisabeth and Herdis Hølleland. 2018. The Scandinavian Far Right and the New Politicisation of Heritage. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 18(2): 121–148. DOI: 10.1177/1469605318757340.
- Smith, Laura Jane J. 2006. *The Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge.
- Wright, Patrick. 1985. *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

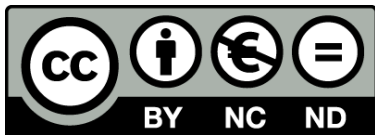
Archäologien der Ambiguität. Kommentar zu Holtorfs *Alternative Futures*

Antonia Davidovic

Zitiervorschlag

Davidovic, Antonia. 2026. Archäologien der Ambiguität. Kommentar zu Holtorfs *Alternative Futures*. Forum Kritische Archäologie 15, Controversy: Alternative Futures: 59–60.

URL	https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-52178
ISSN	2194-346X



Dieser Beitrag steht unter der Creative Commons Lizenz CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 (Namensnennung – Nicht kommerziell – Keine Bearbeitung) International. Sie erlaubt den Download und die Weiterverteilung des Werkes / Inhaltes unter Nennung des Namens des*der Autor*in, jedoch keinerlei Bearbeitung oder kommerzielle Nutzung.

Weitere Informationen zu der Lizenz finden Sie unter: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>.

Archäologien der Ambiguität. Kommentar zu Holtorfs *Alternative Futures*

Antonia Davidovic

antoniadavidovic@gmail.com

Die Anschlussfähigkeit von Heritage für ethnonationale Narrative und für die Plausibilisierung von kriegerischen Auseinandersetzungen konstruiert Heritage-Elemente als Basis für nationale Identitäten, die verteidigt werden müssen; dies ist schwer zu knacken. Gerade die Materialität von archäologischen Artefakten, die eine objektive Faktizität suggeriert, und die eindeutige räumliche Verankerung in einer Fundstelle scheinen eine Verwendung als ethnische Markierung und Sichtbarmachung des ethnischen bzw. nationalen Territoriums so wirksam zu machen.

Die Verknüpfung von Heritage und Ethnizität erscheint auch durch die räumliche Verbindung mit Staaten fast unauflöslich. Hier könnte vielleicht die Neukonzeptionalisierung von Heritage als *Common Good* einen möglichen Ausweg bieten. Der Staat als alleiniger Besitzer und Verwalter wird von lokalen Akteur*innen und Betroffenen abgelöst, die eine Entscheidungsmacht im Umgang mit Heritage erhalten.

Die Ethnisierung von Heritage scheint schließlich auch deshalb so wirkmächtig zu sein, weil archäologische Vorannahmen häufig auf ethnisierenden Narrativen basieren. So werden in vielen Fällen räumlich-zeitlich definierte *Assemblages* mit ethnischen Labels versehen (siehe z. B. den Kelten-Begriff). Archäologische Entitäten werden damit implizit als Ausdruck eines homogenen Volks mit eigenem Bewusstsein imaginiert. Deshalb werden heute in den allermeisten intradisziplinären Diskursen ethnisierende Begriffe konsequent durch archäologische Bezeichnungen ersetzt. Aber spätestens in den Präsentationsformaten von Forschungsergebnissen – in Museen, TV-Dokumentationen oder auf Nachrichtenseiten – werden die Narrative häufig wieder auf ethnisierende Labels reduziert. Ethnisierungen erweisen sich also als erstaunlich zäh, indem sie andere präzisere Begriffe überlagern können. Sie sind offenbar nur schwer aufzuweichen, da sie nicht nur durch staatliche Strukturen und archäologische Kategorisierungspraktiken verstärkt werden, sondern auch in Alltagsdiskursen dominant sind. Ob dabei die Öffentlichkeit tatsächlich nach einer Ethnisierung der Vergangenheit verlangt, um ein Interesse für Heritage zu entwickeln, oder ob es eher auf (impliziten) Vorannahmen von Archäolog*innen beruht, dass solche Narrative in der Präsentation notwendig zu sein scheinen, bleibt zu klären.

Ein Menschen-zentrierter Ansatz, der die heutige Perspektive ins Zentrum stellt, und Heritage als lebendige Praxis sieht, bietet eine konstruktive Alternative. Das vorgeschlagene Konzept der *Heritage Futures*, das zur Modellbildung von möglichen zukünftigen Formaten und Bewertungen von Heritage auffordert, die als Basis für eine Stärkung von Frieden und Nachhaltigkeit dienen können, könnte zu einer Schwächung von Ethnisierungen und der Kriegsfähigkeit von Heritage beitragen.

Aber wie könnten solche neuen Modelle konkret aussehen? Schließlich wird Heritage häufig als Inbegriff des Nicht-Wandels imaginiert. Die tatsächlichen ständigen Veränderungen werden unsichtbar gemacht durch eine Aura des Immer-gleich-Geblienen. Konsequenterweise müsste dies also ersetzt werden durch ein Konzept von Heritage als Inbegriff des Wandels. Dann wäre Heritage mehrdimensional immer in Bedeutungspluralitäten zu denken, indem die vergangenen Bedeutungsveränderungen, die gegenwärtigen Bewertungen und die möglichen zukünftigen Veränderungen gleichzeitig mitgedacht werden. Die gegenwärtigen Bedeutungszuschreibungen sind dann immer nur eine flüchtige Momentaufnahme.

Cornelius Holtorf schlägt einen Ansatz vor, der nicht mehr die Grenzen und Unterschiede ins Zentrum stellt, sondern sich auf die Gemeinsamkeiten und die Verbindungen konzentriert. Es könnte als eine Archäologie der sozialen, politischen, ökonomischen und kulturellen Komplexitäten funktionieren. Hier würde sich z. B. der Fokus auf historische Situationen des Zusammenlebens verschiedener Gruppierungen, auf wechselnde Zusammengehörigkeiten oder auf eine ständige gegenseitige Beeinflussung richten.

Um die Verwendungsfähigkeit von Heritage als Basis für *Nation-Building* aufzuweichen, sollten ethnisierende Begriffe und Vorannahmen in Präsentationsformaten vollständig durch archäologische Kategorien ersetzt werden, wenn keine Eigenaussagen zu Zugehörigkeiten vorhanden sind. Und es könnte dabei noch deutlicher sichtbar gemacht werden, dass heutige soziale und politische Modelle nur selten auf die Vergangenheit übertragen werden können.

Eine Bewertungsverschiebung hin zu einem Modell einer Archäologie des Friedens wäre ein spannendes Forschungsfeld. Als konkrete Ansätze, wie Heritage zu *Peace-Building* beitragen kann, wären z. B. Analysen von historischen Formen von Konfliktlösungsstrategien denkbar und wann ein friedliches Zusammenleben heterogener Gruppierungen gelingen konnte. Ein weiterer Ansatz wäre auch der Blick auf die Machtpositionen bestimmter Narrative und wie diese aufgelöst werden könnten.

Im Hinblick auf den potentiellen Verlust von Heritage wäre zu fragen, welche Elemente warum bisher erhalten blieben. Neue digitale Dokumentationsformate können materielles Heritage in unterschiedlichen digitalen Formaten konservieren; wenn eine stärker reflektierte Debatte stattfindet, kann genauer bestimmt werden, wann ein materieller Erhalt warum als notwendig gilt und wann ein Verschwinden kein Verlust mehr ist. Dann könnte auch eine Akzeptanz für den materiellen Verlust von Heritage entstehen.

The Affordance of Critical Heritage Studies. A Commentary on Cornelius Holtorf's *Alternative Futures*

Stefan Burmeister

Zitiervorschlag

Burmeister, Stefan. 2026. The Affordance of Critical Heritage Studies. A Commentary on Cornelius Holtorf's *Alternative Futures*. Forum Kritische Archäologie 15, Controversy: Alternative Futures: 61–65.

URL <https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de>
DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-52179>
ISSN 2194-346X



Dieser Beitrag steht unter der Creative Commons Lizenz CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 (Namensnennung – Nicht kommerziell – Keine Bearbeitung) International. Sie erlaubt den Download und die Weiterverteilung des Werkes / Inhaltes unter Nennung des Namens des*der Autor*in, jedoch keinerlei Bearbeitung oder kommerzielle Nutzung.

Weitere Informationen zu der Lizenz finden Sie unter: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>.

The Affordance of Critical Heritage Studies. A Commentary on Cornelius Holtorf's *Alternative Futures*

Stefan Burmeister

Museum und Park Kalkriese, Germany, burmeister@kalkriese-varusschlacht.de

Following the Yugoslav War of the 1990s, war has once again reached Europe. Even though the warring parties in Ukraine are fighting on the eastern periphery of the continent, it strikes at the very heart of Europe. In the political rhetoric of Western countries, Europe as a whole is under attack. Even though the fighting has not (yet) extended beyond Ukrainian territory, the war is very much present in people's minds and is invoked as a real scenario for the near future.

In 2025, Germany marked the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War and the Nazi regime. Since then, peace has reigned in this country. However, the fact that this was an exclusively national perspective – one that, as a general statement, would never have withstood critical scrutiny – plays hardly any role in this perception. In the years since 1945, there has scarcely been a time when at least one military conflict has not brought suffering upon the societies involved. In 2025 alone, there were over 50 active military conflicts around the world, some fueled by European weapons (Servicestelle Friedensbildung 2025). Over the last few millennia, war has been a constant companion of history.

The deceptive calm of the last 80 years now seems to be over. Western societies are preparing for a war on a European scale. In Germany, there is a call for 'war readiness' (*Kriegstüchtigkeit*), and attempts are made to achieve it at all levels of society. Cornelius Holtorf approaches this issue from a Swedish perspective. Sweden, too, is preparing for war at various levels of society. Cultural heritage is not excluded: museums are to get ready for war and safeguard their collections against destruction – the official motto is: "better safe than sorry" (Holtorf 2026: 27).

From my own museum perspective, I can only agree: it is better to play it safe. For some time now, the museum sector, both nationally and internationally, has been facing diverse threats. Alongside the ever-present budgetary problems, threats from theft, vandalism, fire, flooding and other disasters – which lie beyond museums' control – are dangers with which these institutions must contend. This is a political imperative and a requirement of professional standards. To this end, emergency plans are being developed and rescue resources made available. Until now in Germany this has largely been left to the discretion and initiative of the institutions themselves and above all has been mostly their own financial responsibility. Thanks to the current political agenda, structures are being created and financial resources allocated for the first time to alleviate the burden on museums. From a pragmatic perspective, museums gratefully accept this initiative – what makes them resilient against the dangers of war also makes them resilient against threats that have long endangered their collections. The internal perspective of cultural heritage institutions is clearly different from Holtorf's academic one.

This alone does not give rise to a difference in content. For Holtorf, culture and cultural heritage are, at their core, a national project aimed at consolidating national identity internally and legitimising aggressive national assertiveness externally. Culture has a constitutive character in the history of European nations in the 19th and 20th centuries. Culture is the propagandistic means of nationalism if understood in this way and cultural heritage the tool of its

pedagogical transmission. I do not wish to judge whether one can draw a parallel between a Swedish government representative's statement that a nation's cultural heritage gives it flesh and blood and Alfred Rosenberg's "blood and soil" ideology. I also leave open Holtorf's assertion that the combination of cultural heritage and toxic ethno-nationalism was partly responsible for the two world wars of the 20th century. However, I fully endorse the assessment that "culture and cultural heritage can support dangerous propaganda and undermine social cohesion and distance people from each other, thereby making divisions and violent conflicts between 'us and them' more likely [...]" (Holtorf 2026: 28). Since the 19th century, culture has been a politically contested concept in many Western nations, and cultural heritage a tool of restrictive and aggressive nationalist politics. If, however, cultural heritage is limited to being an instrument of such politics, the appropriate demand would be to close the museums and dispose of their collections in the rubbish. And museum professionals would have to face the accusation of being agents of reactionary, anti-liberal politics. Yet culture and cultural heritage practice cannot be reduced to this agenda. The problem in cultural heritage practice outlined by Holtorf calls for a more nuanced analysis.

Indigenous cultural heritage constitutes a distinct area of conflict in the debate surrounding postcolonial negotiation processes intended to heal the deep wounds of colonial crimes when it comes to the restitution of looted cultural property. Cultural heritage is of great significance for the peoples of the Global South in terms of their identity and empowerment. Culture is a central anchor of identity, and the psychologically stabilising effect of objects perceived as personal is evident (Habermas 1996). For this reason, the restitution of colonial cultural artefacts is a contested terrain: one side sees itself as the guardian of a *world culture* and does not wish to relinquish its collections, whereas the other side sees itself as having been robbed of its *own culture* and demands its return. The question of 'to whom culture belongs' reveals the full dilemma of this issue. It cannot be answered, since culture is an abstract idea that is realised only through everyday experiences. It is not an entity that can be taken into possession; one aligns oneself with it, one appropriates it – one does not own it. In its abstraction, it is timeless, which is why it can be used to bridge vast periods of time and construct fictional continuities. The instrumentalisation of culture in Western national discourse over the past two centuries, as highlighted by Holtorf, is one facet of the view of culture and cultural heritage but not the only possible one – nor the only one practised (see, for example, Sielert 2026 – although the 'ethnicised heritage' promoted here also focuses on group entities). It is precisely in museums that counter-discourses are initiated and reactionary national narratives deconstructed.

Through the humanities Odo Marquardt identifies the significance of cultural heritage on a different level. These compensate for the damage caused by modernisation. He diagnoses a narrative atrophy in modern society, as the increasing objectification leads to a growing need for compensatory narratives. Marquardt takes up Max Weber's concept of 'disenchantment' through modernity and sees in the aesthetic a compensatory substitute enchantment. The de-naturalisation is countered by a sense of nature and history and supported by dedicated conservation institutions. Museums and cultural heritage, with their mission to research and preserve memory, form part of this project. "No era has destroyed as much as modernity; no era has preserved as much as modernity" (Marquardt 1986: 105–106).

To paraphrase Marx, one might describe cultural heritage politics as another form of opium for the people. Yet this does not do justice to the full scope of human needs. In this sense, cultural heritage is assigned a compensatory function that has a psychologically stabilising effect and addresses the human need for self-positioning. In a rapidly changing world, it provides a haven of calm by signalling permanence and instilling in the observer a certainty regarding their historical place. From a different perspective, the Croatian author Slavenka Draulić sums up this sense of belonging in the face of the deliberate destruction of the Mostar Bridge during the Yugoslav War in 1993:

"Why do we feel more pain looking at the image of the destroyed bridge than the image of massacred people? Perhaps because we see our own mortality in the collapse of the bridge. We expect people to die; we count on our lives to end. The destruction of a monument to civilisation is something else. The bridge in all its beauty and grace was built to outline us; it was an attempt to grasp eternity [...]. A dead woman is one of us – but the bridge is all of us forever." (quoted in Bevan 2006: 26)

The significance of culture is also understood by all warlords and commanders-in-chief worldwide; the cultural heritage of the enemy is always a battlefield in its own right. It is rarely merely a matter of the military subjugation

of the enemy, but often also of their comprehensive destruction, which does not always have to mean the physical annihilation of the population. It is sufficient to eradicate the foundations and certainties of their identity. It is thus remarkable that during the ethnically driven Bosnian War of 1992–1995, the country lost more of its architectural heritage than it did during the Second World War (Bevan 2006: 42) – cultural monuments, churches and mosques, cultural institutions, libraries and schools were military targets on all sides. Memory, history and identity are linked to cultural heritage, which makes these places a target *sui generis*.

The view of cultural heritage presented by Holtorf in his contribution as a precursor to aggressive nationalism is very narrow – although he goes on to regard *well-being* and *mutuality* as goals of cultural heritage – and constructs more of a cliché than it offers an analysis of current cultural heritage practice. From this narrow focus, he derives his critique of the current discourse on the crisis, which culminates in questions such as the following (Holtorf 2026: 30):

- “How can we employ cultural heritage to serve other agenda than those of nationalism, exclusive identities, violence and destruction?”
- “How can we imagine cultural heritage in roles that lead towards peace rather than war?”

Holtorf formulates an alternative for which Critical Cultural Heritage Studies serve as an important point of reference. His aim is summarised in a single sentence: “In my view, the state, culture and cultural heritage should continue to benefit people by maintaining or re-establishing peace and social cohesion, not by enhancing endurance and resistance against possible aggressors and increasing a will to defend national identity militarily” (Holtorf 2026: 32). This goal could be achieved by “exploring different possible futures and imagining uses of cultural heritage that serve peace, social sustainability and wellbeing, to name just a few worthwhile priorities for action” (Holtorf 2026: 31). Yes, why not? Unfortunately, Holtorf gets bogged down in such platitudes. His proposal reads like the ambitious but noncommittal manifesto of a peace party. How can his goal be translated into action? He concludes by calling for the “preparedness of culture and cultural heritage for maintaining peace, not winning wars” (Holtorf 2026: 33). It is no trivial matter to emphasise once again here that the current and planned measures for the protection of cultural property in times of war are not measures designed to win a war, but to survive one. This resilience, however, is a thorn in his side; he advocates a shift away from a “future of fear for objects” towards a “future of hope for people” (Holtorf 2026: 32). What does this mean? For today’s museum professionals, human life takes precedence over the protection of cultural heritage, as is evident from numerous crisis and emergency plans. The called-for (general?) shift away from concern for cultural heritage is, however, hardly communicable within museum institutions.

And this is where, for me, the real problem with Holtorf’s article lies. One may find his overestimation of the role that culture and cultural heritage play in the escalation or de-fusing of global or national crises and wars disconcerting, yet still sympathise with his concern. Holtorf stops at merely proclaiming a new approach without fleshing it out. He refers explicitly to Critical Cultural Heritage Studies, which, however, cannot point the way forward here. Critical Cultural Heritage (see, for example, Harrison et al. 2020, 2023) is a people-centred approach that analyses power structures, institutional conditions, and cultural professionals and explores the possibilities of cultural heritage practice to shape a different future within this network of diverse actors. This approach draws on actor-network theory and – without explicit reference – on Science and Technology Studies. Here, the practices of cultural heritage institutions are analysed; these institutions become the object of observation without themselves being part of it. The diagnosis is sometimes illuminating, but leaves the patient without a proposed treatment and thus at a loss.

This reveals an almost insurmountable problem of mediation. The general call for a new approach in cultural heritage practice, with an associated departure from the existing professional ethos of cultural property protection, is thus hardly communicable – and therefore also unachievable. The concept of affordance, introduced in the discourse on materiality, is appropriate here. The American psychologist James J. Gibson developed the concept to describe the interaction of the perceiver with certain properties of the environment (Gibson 1979; for an overview, see, e.g., Greeno 1994; Jenkins 2008). Objects and techniques possess affordance in that they offer certain possibilities for their use. Gibson viewed affordance as a property inherent to the object.

However, the concept left open the question of how the potential user accesses the possibilities for use offered by the affordances of objects. Possibilities or offers alone do not lead to actions; nor does the object itself issue any prompt that shapes action. Furthermore, as the one-sided focus on the material aspect excludes the actor, critics emphasise the significance of the situational context in which object and user encounter one another. According to Anthony Chemero (2003: 187) and Carl Knappett (2004: 46), affordances are not properties of things, but of the specific situations in which things and potential users come together. The object must be conceived in conjunction with its user. Rob Withagen et al. define affordances as “action possibilities that *can* invite” (Withagen et al. 2012: 255). While an object generally permits different modes of use, not all affordances invite action. The actions to which a user feels invited depend on various factors related to the user. These include their specific abilities, experiences and needs, but also the respective social context, which facilitates or hinders specific actions.

Holtorf excludes the complex field of affordance in Critical Cultural Heritage and the possibilities for cultural heritage practitioners to tap into it. New ideas do not prevail simply on the basis of a better argument; they must overcome resistance, tendencies towards persistence, and entrenched practical routines. The academic stance of instruction and the one-dimensional, undifferentiated focus on a single aspect of historical cultural heritage practice do not overcome these hurdles.

References

- Bevan, Robert. 2006. *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Chemero, Anthony. 2003. An Outline of a Theory of Affordances. *Ecological Psychology* 15(2): 181–195. DOI: 10.1207/S15326969ECO1502_5.
- Gibson, James J. 1979. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Greeno, James G. 1994. Gibson’s Affordances. *Psychological Review* 101(2): 336–342. DOI: 10.1037/0033-295X.101.2.336.
- Habermas, Tilmann. 1996. *Geliebte Objekte. Symbole und Instrumente der Identitätsbildung*. Perspektiven der Humanwissenschaften, Phänomenologisch-psychologische Forschungen 19. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Harrison, Rodney, Caitlin DeSilvey, Cornelius Holtorf, Sharon Macdonald, Nadia Bartolini et al., eds. 2020. *Heritage Futures. Comparative Approaches to Natural and Cultural Heritage Practices*. London: University College London Press.
- Harrison, Rodney, Nélia Dias and Kristian Kristiansen, eds. 2023. *Critical Heritage Studies and the Futures of Europe*. London: University College London Press.
- Holtorf, Cornelius. 2026. Alternative Futures: How Can Cultural Heritage Be Mobilized for Peace Rather than War? *Forum Kritische Archäologie* 15, Controversy: Alternative Futures: 25–36. DOI: 10.17169/refubium-52134.
- Jenkins, Harold S. 2008. Gibson’s “Affordances”: Evolution of a Pivotal Concept. *Journal of Scientific Psychology* 2008(Dec.): 34–45.
- Knappett, Carl. 2004. The Affordance of Things: A Post-Gibsonian Perspective on the Relationality of Mind and Matter. In Elizabeth DeMarrais, Chris Gosden and Colin Renfrew, eds.: *Rethinking Materiality: The Engagement of Mind with the Material World*, pp. 43–51. Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research.
- Marquardt, Odo. 1986. Über die Unvermeidlichkeit der Geisteswissenschaften. In Odo Marquardt, *Apologie des Zufälligen. Philosophische Studien*, pp. 98–116. Stuttgart: Reclam.
- Servicestelle Friedensbildung. 2025. Kriege und Konflikte weltweit. Aktuelle Porträts und Analysen aus friedenspädagogischer Sicht. <https://www.friedensbildung-bw.de/aktuelle-konflikte>. Last viewed: 20.03.2026.

Sielert, Deborah. 2026. *Belonging Through Heritage? Minority Boundary-Making and the Reach of Global Frameworks in Northern Germany*. Bielefeld: transcript.

Withagen, Rob, Harjo J. de Poel, Duarte Araújo and Gert-Jan Pepping. 2012. Affordances Can Invite Behavior: Reconsidering the Relationship between Affordances and Agency. *New Ideas in Psychology* 30(2): 250–258. DOI: 10.1016/j.newideapsych.2011.12.003.

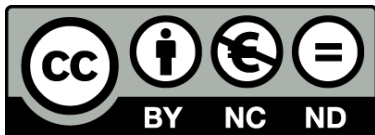
Reply: What Can Give Us Hope

Cornelius Holtorf

Zitiervorschlag

Holtorf, Cornelius. 2026. Reply: What Can Give Us Hope. Forum Kritische Archäologie 15, Controversy: Alternative Futures: 66–70.

URL	https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-52180
ISSN	2194-346X



Dieser Beitrag steht unter der Creative Commons Lizenz CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 (Namensnennung – Nicht kommerziell – Keine Bearbeitung) International. Sie erlaubt den Download und die Weiterverteilung des Werkes / Inhaltes unter Nennung des Namens des*der Autor*in, jedoch keinerlei Bearbeitung oder kommerzielle Nutzung.

Weitere Informationen zu der Lizenz finden Sie unter: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>.

Reply: What Can Give Us Hope

Cornelius Holtorf

UNESCO Chair on Heritage Futures, Linnaeus University, Sweden, cornelius.holtorf@lnu.se

I genuinely appreciate the diverse but equally interesting comments submitted by my colleagues, adding a variety of additional perspectives to the discussion informed by different backgrounds and personal viewpoints. It is not self-evident that we make time to engage with one another's ideas and offer thoughtful responses. To my colleagues: thank you for doing so, and to the editors: thank you for making it possible.

Such an exchange is exactly what I had hoped for: stimulating a broad academic debate among the contributors to this discussion and eventually perhaps also among all those sufficiently intrigued by the topic to consider carefully our arguments as published. Down the line, I hope this will mobilise more archaeologists, heritage scholars, and heritage practitioners to raise their voices for peace in our shared contemporary world and on the planet we jointly inhabit, with many challenges to be addressed by all humans together rather than as adversaries and enemies.

With this said, my original paper was not a research paper in the sense that it presented solid empirical evidence on which to build academic knowledge. Nor did I attempt to address all the complex dimensions of cultural heritage in society. I deliberately adopted a somewhat polemical tone to make my argument. But that should not mean, as Anna McWilliams suggested, that my points were sloppy or questionable. I consider them both timely and necessary in the current political climate in Sweden and beyond. It was a debate article on a question to which the answer not so long ago would have been self-evident, as Carolin Jauß pointed out. Today, however, the answer is no longer self-evident, as cultural heritage is increasingly mobilised for war. We urgently need to reflect again on cultural heritage and peace. This means asking what heritage can do in society and indeed to society. It means to worry about the future, asking ourselves who we want to be and how we want to live as humans on this planet.

Hans Peter Hahn suggested that I was “beating a dead horse,” arguing that my critique merely addressed popular and political understandings and uses of heritage that academia has long since moved beyond. Meanwhile, Laura McAtackney noted that she could appreciate my argument with “some degree of detached academic interest,” while wishing for a more explicitly politicised discussion. I guess much depends on where everybody is coming from and what they mean by politics. What I will add to my original positioning is that, in my view, the call for peace is deeply political. It challenges the powers that be on behalf of human rights and on the (I dare say) universal human aspiration to live together peacefully. It calls for strengthening trust and solidarity within and between communities and societies. It recognises that wars result only in victims. Cultural heritage has often been, and currently is, complicit in making war more likely. This must change now. That is my politics. Academic researchers ought to participate in this endeavour actively.

The most recent seemingly reliable figures suggest that by now (April 2026) there have been almost two million (!) dead, wounded and missing soldiers and civilians on the Ukrainian and Russian sides combined. Imagine how many people have lost family members. Many of the casualties were victims of weapons financed or produced in countries not themselves party to the war, including ours. When will it be enough for either side to stop the carnage? The scale of human suffering is already enormous. It also constitutes a fiasco of decades of global foreign policy and multilateral diplomacy.

Anna McWilliams and Stefan Burmeister asked for more concrete ideas about preventing violent conflict and working toward peace in a political context dominated by the threat of war. How can my call for peace be translated into action? I disagree with Anatolijs Venovcevs who seems to be calling for protecting peace with weapons. Peace, in my view, must be built and maintained by fostering trust and understanding between people, communities, and societies. It is about including, not excluding, about caring for one another rather than protecting ourselves from one another. You don't fight people you know, respect, understand, and therefore trust (Figure 1).

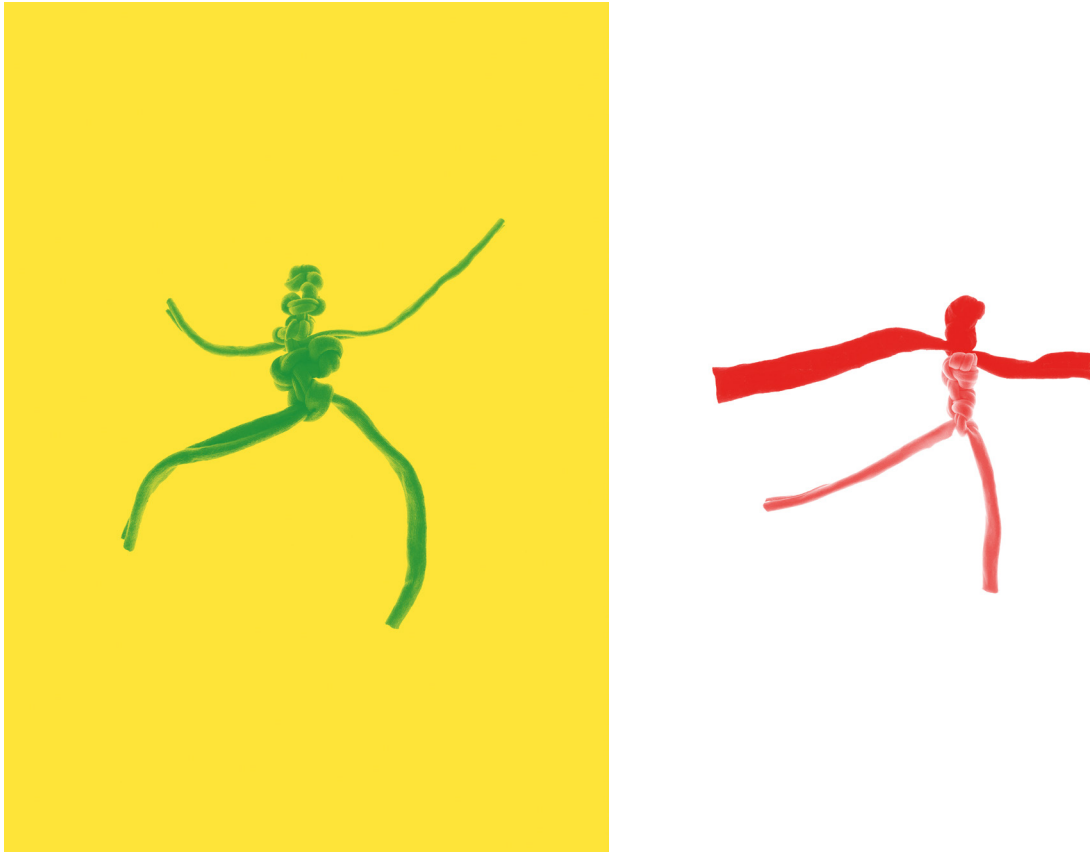


Fig. You don't fight people you know, respect, understand, and therefore trust. Two thread figures from Pernilla Frid's artwork *Signs of Hope* (2026).

Peace is a long-term project. In my original paper, I discussed the growing significance of people-centred policies on cultural heritage. These have many practical implications, increasingly visible in global heritage management, e.g., in the rising attention given to communities living with cultural heritage. I believe much more could be done to promote peace through heritage, for example by strengthening inclusive global identities that draw on our similarities as human beings rather than existing differences.

Human communities and societies display a large variety of ways of life and associated mindsets (not all agreeable to everybody), but at the end of the day we remain, fundamentally, human and should never forget that essential fact. Few objects express this view more powerfully than Earth seen from space, where borders between people have faded away and the shared predicaments of human and non-human life on a single planet in the Universe become obvious (Figure 2). It is no coincidence that the overview perspective on Earth, taken from the outside as it were, has been of central importance in the emergence of the environmental movement. This is why space heritage should be understood not only as the heritage of specific people and countries but also as heritage of humanity at large.



Fig. 2. Earth seen from space, where borders between people have faded away and the shared predicaments of human and non-human life on a single planet in the Universe become obvious. Photograph taken on 2 April 2026 by Reid Wiseman/NASA from Artemis II.

At the same time, there are no shortcuts to peace when relations between nations and people are in the shambles they are in various world regions now. Yet there are steps we can take to avoid worsening the situation and perhaps begin to improve it. In concrete terms, I propose two immediate actions for the cultural and heritage sectors in Europe.

First, we should actively seek dialogue, and perhaps lasting friendship, with the Russians living among us. We should also try to deepen our knowledge of Russian history, language, religion, literature, music, art, and any other heritage, in all their varieties and complexities. This is not particularly difficult to do in European countries, as a significant part of Russia is geographically part of Europe and has long been deeply connected to European history and culture. For the same reason, we should expect and support equivalent efforts on the Russian side regarding other European cultures and cultural heritage.

Second, we should study existing examples of successful peacebuilding in the world. We should remember that, despite its many challenges today, the European Union began as a peace project shortly after the end of World War II that had brought havoc to much of the world. Since then, European integration has brought countries and their people so close that a war between, for example, Germany and France is now inconceivable, although only a century ago it was equally inconceivable that both countries and their people should not always be enemies, fighting each other at regular intervals. With sustained effort, similar transformations may one day be possible in relations between all European countries and Russia.

There are other examples of initiatives that can give us hope. In Sweden (and increasingly in Germany), politicians talk about implementing a policy of “Total Defense”. This sounds alarming. If anything is to be totalised, we should opt for total peace. One way forward is to complement Ministries of Defense (or of War, as the US now has

it) with Ministries of Peace (Sevéus 2024). This is not a new idea. It has been proposed in various forms in Sweden, Canada, the UK, and the United States, where a bill to establish a Department of Peacebuilding was introduced in Congress in 2025 (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/1111/text>, last viewed 13.04.2026). The proposed bill quoted the preamble of the 2000 Earth Charter stating that “in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.” In that spirit, the proposed Department of Peacebuilding was to be dedicated, among others, to the study and promotion of conditions conducive to both domestic and international peace and a culture of peace.

Costa Rica established a Ministry of Justice and Peace in 2009. Ethiopia has had a Ministry of Peace since 2018, which, quoting from its webpages, “advances positive peace, embedding peace as a national value in the minds of present and future generations” (<https://mop.gov.et/en>, last viewed 13.04.2026). Cultural heritage is one area that might be administered within such ministries (see Holtorf 2023 for some concrete heritage policies to be promoted in such a context).

The possibility of having Ministries of Peace in many countries creates hope rather than the kind of fear caused by ongoing efforts of militarisation and preparation of societies for war (as I discussed in my original paper for Sweden). In the past, preppers were getting ready to continue their lives independently from others at the prospect of society’s impending doom. Today, we see throughout Europe a renaissance of extensive civil contingency planning which is a form of governmental prepping. Arguably, at the heart of all prepping is a desire for disaster (Horn 2024). That desire is what we currently see in Europe. This trend resonates with much of the cultural heritage sector which since its establishment two centuries ago has been thriving on the idea of safeguarding a community’s most valuable possessions in the light of continuous endangerment caused by a variety of direct threats (Holtorf 2018). Today, the cultural heritage sector is increasingly moving toward people-centred approaches, sustainable development, and identified connections between heritage, wellbeing, and happiness.

In this evolving context, a strong commitment to peace is essential: preparing for war is less important than preventing war. More research is urgently needed investigating not only the predicaments of cultural heritage management when it plays into the hands of those preparing for war. But researchers should also study extensively how cultural heritage can strengthen its links to sustainable development, peace, wellbeing, and happiness of human and non-human beings. Finally, accepting the scope of heritage futures, the opportunities of futures thinking regarding heritage should be explored further in order to address peace and other future challenges. More needs to be known on how to imagine and bring about alternative futures for understanding and using heritage to create benefits under changing circumstances, while refusing the seemingly timeless logics of conflict and war.

The question is not only what we can do for heritage but increasingly also what the heritage can do for us.

Note

The ideas and opinions expressed in the original article and in this reply are mine. They are not necessarily those of UNESCO, and they do not imply any commitment by the Organization.

References

- Holtorf, Cornelius. 2018. Preservation Paradigm in Heritage Management. In Claire Smith, ed.: *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*. Cham: Springer. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-51726-1_1080-2.
- Holtorf, Cornelius. 2023. Towards a World Heritage for the Anthropocene. In Nick Shepherd, ed.: *Rethinking Heritage in Precarious Times: Coloniality, Climate Change, and Covid-19*, pp. 111–126. London and New York: Routledge.

Horn, Eva. 2024. A Desire for Disaster. In Anniina Koivu and Jolanthe Kugler, eds.: *We Will Survive: The Prepper Movement*, pp. 108–114. Lausanne: Museum of Contemporary Design and Applied Arts (mudac).

Sevéus, Valentin. 2024. *Världen behöver fredspragmatiker*. 2nd ed. Stockholm: Sevéus.

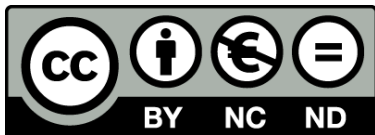
Reality Checks for *Alternative Futures*

Simon Radchenko and Olha Demchenko

Zitiervorschlag

Simon Radchenko and Olha Demchenko. 2026. Reality Checks for *Alternative Futures*. Forum Kritische Archäologie 15, Controversy: Alternative Futures: 87–91.

URL	https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-53742
ISSN	2194-346X



Dieser Beitrag steht unter der Creative Commons Lizenz CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 (Namensnennung – Nicht kommerziell – Keine Bearbeitung) International. Sie erlaubt den Download und die Weiterverteilung des Werkes / Inhaltes unter Nennung des Namens des*der Autor*in, jedoch keinerlei Bearbeitung oder kommerzielle Nutzung.

Weitere Informationen zu der Lizenz finden Sie unter: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>.

Reality Checks for *Alternative Futures*

Simon Radchenko

University of Stavanger, Norway; NGO Scientific and Research Lab “Archaic”, Ukraine;
symon.radchenko@uis.no

Olha Demchenko

Odesa I.I. Mechnykov National University, Ukraine; olha.demchenko@onu.edu.ua

Thirst, interest, gratitude, and empathy would be the first feelings that Ukrainian archaeologists share as the discussion on war and cultural heritage expands and grows in detail. Our country has been at the center of this discussion or, at least, its European parts. Although we do not agree with the arguments in all of the comments, years of displacement and the fight for heritage in Ukraine and of Ukraine have taught us to appreciate all of them. Even those that feel one-sided give us a space for reflection and sometimes to make our voices heard.

Therefore, the controversial discussion on *Alternative Futures* launched by Cornelius Holtorf (2026a) was met by us with the same feeling. We appreciate Holtorf’s effort to discuss the complicated, conflicting, and provocative topic of the relation between cultural heritage, war, and mobilization, and we are grateful to the FKA Editorial Collective for the opportunity to comment on this contribution.

Our comment will be more critical than supportive, largely determined by the current position of its authors: Ukrainian scholars who lost their friends and relatives on the front line and who work extensively on both cultural heritage preservation and the ethical aspects of archaeological practice in times of war. We challenge several points in Holtorf’s discussion paper (2026a) and in his reply (2026b) to discussants. We consider these two texts together rather than as distinct contributions; in our view, the reply highlights some arguments of the paper, making it necessary to address them. Our comment will focus on the war between Russia and Ukraine. While Holtorf grounds his contribution in discussions of cultural heritage policies in Sweden, he criticizes first and foremost preparedness for war with Russia. Therefore, discussing Russia at war is directly related to the paper’s main topic, making a Ukrainian voice necessary for an informed discussion.

The benefit of including diverse and multivocal perspectives in ethical and political thinking is that it prevents one from falling into a false dichotomy between two bad choices. The reflection on heritage militarization is precisely an example of such a dichotomy: a choice between the grim and primitive reality of nationalistic projects that echo the experiences of the early 20th century stands opposite complete disarmament in the face of a military threat. One way to mask the nature of this choice is to turn a blind eye to a threat, pretending that peace is a project that can be achieved unilaterally if certain preconditions are met. This is only possible for those who avoid opposing the aggressor and making an ethical judgment, focusing on the effect (militarization of culture) rather than the cause (the biggest war in Europe since 1945). However, avoiding an ethical judgment while others are suffering from crimes and violence committed by the aggressor one chose not to notice is an example of patchy and selective ethics. In contrast, applying a holistic ethical approach (Keegan and Keegan 1992) opens a better path: to be realistic, while recognizing the aggressors and confronting them; to maintain ethical integrity; and to avoid falling prey to a false dichotomy. Indeed, we are not obliged to limit ourselves to either the scary promises of heritage militarization or the unrealistic dreams of unilateral peace. To start searching for a third path, we shall first clarify why we consider unilateral peace, such as that which Holtorf suggests in his contribution, unethical and unrealistic.

We strongly agree with Holtorf's assertion that culture and heritage should be seen in terms of caring for people. Moreover, the battle that archaeology has fought over the last decades is to recognize that the view of the other can be fundamentally different from our own. While this is repeatedly emphasized by both post-colonial theory and various relational ontologies, we sometimes struggle to apply this knowledge in our everyday lives. Holtorf's contribution is a good example of this slippage: it either overlooks that more than one actor must be against the war in order to prevent it from happening, or it assumes that Russia's and Russian society's aspirations echo Europe's aspirations for peace. This is a strong assumption (in the sense that it should be proven to support an argument); however, there is not a single piece of evidence showing that Russia wants peace. On the contrary, all possible sources indicate the opposite: whenever actors in the Russian military or society had a choice of destroying Ukrainian heritage or abstaining from doing so, they chose the first option (Radchenko 2026). Assuming that any kind of peacebuilding through culture and heritage with Russia will be symmetrical would ignore centuries of using culture as an asset of aggression (Margolis 2025) and of imperial influence (Kiosak 2026).

We think that Holtorf's paper would benefit from a critical reading of Ukrainian voices (Ivanysko et al. 2024; Shydlovskiy et al. 2023) and Russian voices (Sergeitsev 2022; Yakovleva 2022), including those of anti-war refugees in Europe (Margolis 2025), but there is no attempt to do that, even though these voices are out there and available to be read. In this moment, a discussion is unfolding about a possible Russian provocation or invasion in the Baltic states (Griera 2026; Sabbagh 2026), emphasizing the gap between the universalization of the pursuit of peace and the reality of the frontline.

Holtorf notes in his reply to the commentaries that, "Many of the casualties [in Ukraine] were victims of weapons financed or produced in countries not themselves party to the war, including ours. When will it be enough for either side to stop the carnage?" (Holtorf 2026b: 66). Considered alongside the broader argument of the paper, including the call for urgent engagement with Russian "history, language, religion, literature, music, art, and any other heritage" (Holtorf 2026b: 68), this passage could be read as expressing reservations about continued military support for Ukraine. At the very least, this is exactly how it reads from a Ukrainian perspective. Even more so, as this would fall in line with the peaceful European future Holtorf advocates for – at the price of Ukraine and Ukrainians' existence. While the consequences of such an interpretation may not have been intended, they may echo narratives advanced by Russian authorities.

Indeed, "you don't fight people you know, respect, understand, and therefore trust" (Holtorf 2026b: 67). Empathy, respect, and mutual understanding are crucial in the common future we attempt to build – including empathy towards those fighting for their freedom and for limiting the escalation of war further into Europe. This is also long acknowledged by Ukrainian anthropologists (Buyskykh 2023), who argue for the need to hear and understand a Ukrainian voice when it comes to theoretical debates in academia. Paying more attention to the Ukrainian perspective would prevent Holtorf from expressions such as, "Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent war" (Holtorf 2026a: 25), which ignores eight years of Russian aggression from 2014 to 2022 and thousands of Ukrainian citizens killed. Another way to avoid constructing phrases like those above is to familiarize oneself with the heritage-related contributions of Mikhail Piotrovsky, Vladimir Putin, or Alexander Dugin.

It would be easier to perceive Holtorf's paper as an attempt at academic discussion if it did not struggle to recognize the facts – when the Russian war in Ukraine actually started, which country is the aggressor, and which party actually prevents peace from happening. We argued, and continue to argue, that there are cases in which stepping aside, making any statement, or taking any action without the ethical judgment is immoral, and we claim that the war in Europe (currently limited to Ukrainian territory due to the courage and resilience of Ukrainians) is one of these cases (Radchenko and Kiosak 2023). Not acknowledging this will present any argument as supporting Russian narratives and justifying their attempts to take land, kill people, and destroy countries as an acceptable practice. We hardly assume this is the intention, but we consider it an unwanted mistake.

As for the statements on cultural heritage and cultural heritage policies the text is trying to make, we believe they would benefit from incorporating at least some Ukrainian sources when discussing Ukrainian heritage (currently, there are none). While it is stated that "how culture is used in the current conflict between Ukraine and

Russia where cultural heritage and history serve on both sides to strengthen morale by reinforcing a strong sense of national identity on their respective territories and thereby instilling in the troops on both sides the perception of furthering a historical mission” (Holtorf 2026a: 28), references provided (Mick 2023; Munawar and Symonds 2023) do not supply any evidence for this statement, and it is not clear how to connect them to the specific ideas of the cited authors. Backing the theoretical considerations with literature research would be a valuable way to familiarize oneself with both the affordances of “Russkiy mir” (Russian world/peace) and cultural heritage objects that emerged during the war, such as mass graves near Izyum, the destroyed city of Bakhmut, or the inscribed door from an improvised prison in Yahidne (Kierszys and Lemiesz 2026).

Even ruling out the dark heritage of the war, the paper remains highly provocative in discussing “inscription of the Historic Centre of Odesa as a World Heritage property following an accelerated procedure that started after the beginning of the war” (Holtorf 2026a: 29). On the one hand, it would be honest and correct to mention the inscription of the Rock Paintings of Shulgan-Tash Cave (Russian Federation) in the list in 2025 (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/documents/222352>) or investigate the ongoing processes at those UNESCO World Heritage sites (including the Tentative Lists) that end up in the occupied territories, such as Chersonesos Taurica that underwent destruction and unsolicited renovation after 2014 (Kravchenko and Reida 2026), or a looted rock art site of Kamyana Mohyla (Radchenko 2026). On the other hand, using Odesa as an example seems to be a less than ideal choice given the repeated Russian imperialistic claims for the Russian origin of the city. One could expect that Russia will not be trying to destroy a city that is, in their own view, “deeply connected to [Russian] history and culture” (just as Holtorf thinks Europe to be – see Holtorf 2026b: 68). However, this is not the case. On the contrary, since 2024, the Historical Center of Odesa has been shelled dozens of times, and the university and the archaeological museum have been repeatedly damaged by these shellings.

As a current resident of Odesa who lived less than a kilometer from the historic city center, one of the authors of this reply fails to see how UNESCO’s decision could be interpreted as an aggressive act against Russia. It appears to have been a futile attempt to deter Russian forces from bombing the historic center, an effort that evidently failed. We have no idea how this decision is supposed to reinforce any Ukrainian national historical myth. The place of Odesa in Ukrainian history is widely debated, but UNESCO’s decision neither resolves that debate nor meaningfully advances any interpretation of it. Moreover, we think it is wrong to put on the same shelf of aggressive acts both the formal decision of an international body and actual damage caused by the bombardment of historic buildings and monuments in the Odesa city center by Russian troops.

We certainly agree with the need to embrace transformation and, sometimes, the loss of cultural heritage as part of the cultural heritage management process (Holtorf 2026a: 31). However, it is crucial to acknowledge the various ways in which heritage can be lost. While losing heritage to time and nature is not something new to Ukrainian archaeology, we still find ourselves actively protesting against losing it to Russian missiles or looters. In our view, this unnecessary loss is something to oppose, especially given that we could run out of heritage to protect. One example of this situation is the destructive ‘renovation’ of the only example of Qirimli palace architecture in Bakhchysarai (the only palace architecture of this indigenous nation of Crimea), resulting in a significant loss of its unique cultural value. The way we see it, striving to preserve cultural heritage in Sweden and the desire to identify means of preserving it if and when war comes are a form of managing the loss. We can think of this management as people-centered action, assuming that preserved heritage is of value to those who share memories, experiences, and identity with heritage sites.

Only after all this work of unpacking and investigating the ethical and logical pathways Holtorf takes in his contribution does it become possible to meaningfully address its main topic – the jeopardy of total preparedness and the relevance of heritage militarization in the local Swedish context. We believe that the Ukrainian experience clearly shows that it is unachievable to ensure peace and security unilaterally. And if the other side wants war, there is very little that can be done. Essentially, having Russia at one’s borders creates the urgency to prepare for war. Especially now, when there is no way for Russia to end this war without significant social and economic stress.

While we think it is a good idea to ensure that all risks are assessed, all heritage evacuation and preservation pathways are known, and all instructions are developed, it remains evident that there is more to cultural heritage preservation than caring for objects. The experience of heritage digitization in Ukraine (Radchenko and Hadick 2024) highlighted the same arguments that Holtorf reaches theoretically: cultural heritage is, first and foremost, an

institution, and sustaining the connection between people, heritage objects, and knowledge of the past and possible futures should be prioritized over digitizing all ceramic pots. However, constructing and utilizing this understanding should take into account the needs and motivations of all actors involved, including governmental bodies and states as complex entities.

One important issue that authorities might seek to address by including culture in the White Paper on Defense (Swedish Government 2024: 142–143), and that Holtorf rightly points out, is “fostering [people’s] will to defend.” On the one hand, it is reasonable to consider such tools in light of the growing discouragement of young European citizens to participate in defense should the war come to their home countries (Dettmer 2024; Pilkington 2024). On the other hand, Europe indeed has a devastating experience of military mobilization around cultural and national narratives, and as right-wing politics becomes less and less marginal, such calls may sound alarming. Yet the threat of war remains real, especially for Scandinavian countries, which are affected by both their proximity to Russia and by Arctic security issues. The question to be asked, then, is how to strike a balance between the threat of external war and the risk of cultural and military mobilization from within. Are there any other ways to talk about culture and preparedness besides evoking the nationalistic narratives Holtorf is anxious about? And furthermore, what messages should culture and cultural heritage convey to build preparedness without hate, security without dehumanization, and a future without becoming an aggressor?

Of all possible answers, there are some that we, as representatives of (hopefully) people-centered cultural heritage institutions, can’t afford. First, a one-sided attitude that ignores others’ views and perspectives when discussing challenging and provocative topics. Second, being uncompassionate to those alongside us. And third, being unrealistic about which alternative futures we can make possible and what the cost of our decisions will be along the way.

References

- Buyskykh, Julia. 2023. Old-New Colonial Tendencies in Social Anthropology: Empathy in Wartime. *Ethnologia Polona* 44: 55–85. DOI: 10.23858/ethp.2023.44.3366.
- Dettmer, Jamie. 2024. For King and Country? Europe’s Young May not Be Willing to Fight. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-nato-young-soldiers-war-ukraine-draft-conscription-dday-fight-russia/>. Last viewed 15.07.2026.
- Griera, Max. 2026. Putin’s Next Move Will Be Baltic Incursion, Warns Top Russian Dissident. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/putins-next-move-baltic-incursion-warns-top-russian-dissident/>. Last viewed 15.07.2026.
- Holtorf, Cornelius. 2026a. Alternative Futures: How Can Cultural Heritage Be Mobilized for Peace Rather than War? *Forum Kritische Archäologie* 15, Controversy: Alternative Futures: 25–36. DOI: 10.17169/refubium-52134.
- Holtorf, Cornelius. 2026b. Reply: What Can Give Us Hope. *Forum Kritische Archäologie* 15, Controversy: Alternative Futures: 66–70. DOI: 10.17169/refubium-52180.
- Ivanysko, Svitlana, Gennadiy Kazakevych and Pavlo Shydlovskiy. 2024. Cultural Heritage in the Russo-Ukrainian War: A Victim in the Conflict. *Complutum* 35(1): 191–214. DOI: 10.5209/cmpl.95930.
- Keegan, Lynn and Gerald T. Keegan. 1992. A Concept of Holistic Ethics for the Health Professional. *Journal of Holistic Nursing* 10: 205–217. DOI: 10.1177/089801019201000303.
- Kierszys, Grzegorz and Marek Lemiesz. 2026. Spectres of Violence: Contemporary Archaeology of the Yahidne War Crime. *Antiquity* 100(411): 796–817. DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2026.10322.
- Kiosak, Dmytro. 2026. Ukrainian Archaeology Counteracts Russian Imperialism: Which Way to Choose? *Acta Archaeologica* 96(1): 11–24. DOI: 10.1163/16000390-12341023.
- Kravchenko, Evelina and Roman Reida. 2026. The Ancient City of Tauric Chersonesus and its Chora: A World

- Heritage Site under Threat. *Acta Archaeologica* 96(1): 42–58. DOI: 10.1163/16000390-12341027.
- Margolis, Ekaterina. 2025. Conductor of War. Ekaterina Margolis – on Culture as a Battlefield. *Radio Svoboda*. 24.07.2025. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/dirizher-voyny-ekaterina-margolis-o-kuljture-kak-po-le-boya/33481733.html>. Last viewed 03.08.2026.
- Mick, Christoph. 2023. The Fight for the Past: Contested Heritage and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice* 14(2): 135–153. DOI: 10.1080/17567505.2023.2205703.
- Munawar, Nour A. and James Symonds. 2023. Empires of Lies? The Political Uses of Cultural Heritage in War. *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice* 14(3): 308–325. DOI: 10.1080/17567505.2023.2205193.
- Pilkington, Philip. 2024. Young Europeans Do not Want to Fight Russia. *UnHerd*. <https://unherd.com/newsroom/young-europeans-do-not-want-to-fight-russia/>. Last viewed 15.07.2026.
- Radchenko, Simon. 2026. Ukrainian Cultural Heritage at War through the Destructive Russian Actions. *Acta Archaeologica* 96(1): 25–41. DOI: 10.1163/16000390-12341024.
- Radchenko, Simon and Kacey Hadick. 2024. Preserving Ukrainian Legacy: Midway Reflections and Lessons Learnt. *The European Archaeologist* 80: 24–31.
- Radchenko, Simon and Dmytro Kiosak. 2023. Always Take a Look Back. Ethics in Post-conflict Archaeology. *Archaeological Dialogues* 30(1): 89–93. DOI: 10.1017/S1380203823000041.
- Sabbagh, Dan. 2026. Russia Preparing Possible ‘Provocation’ in Baltic States or Poland, Sources Say. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jun/26/russia-provocation-baltic-states-poland>. Last viewed 15.07.2026.
- Sergeitsev, Timofei. 2022. Chto Rossiya dolzhna sdelat’s Ukrainoy? [What Russia Should Do with Ukraine?] *RIA Novosti*. 03.04.2022.
- Shydlovskiy, Pavlo, Ian Kuijt, Vyacheslav Skorokhod, Ivan Zotsenko, Vsevolod Ivakin, William Donaruma and Sean Field. 2023. The Tools of War: Conflict and the Destruction of Ukrainian Cultural Heritage. *Antiquity* 97(396): Art. e36. DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2023.159.
- Swedish Government. 2024. Totalförsvaret 2025–2030. Regeringens Proposition 2024/25:34. <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/proposition/2024/10/prop.-20242534>. Last viewed 15.07.2026.
- Yakovleva, Elena. 2022. Pochemu neobkhodimo byt’ so svoey stranoy, kogda ona sovershaet istoricheskiy povorot i vybor. Otvechayet Mikhail Piotrovskiy [Why Is it Necessary to Stand by Your Country when it Makes a Historic Turn and Choice? Answered by Mikhail Piotrovsky]. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. 22.06.2022.