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INHERITANCES PAST AND FUTURE: ADDRESSING THE EVERYDAY LEGACY OF WAR IN TIMES OF MILITARISATION*

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ABSTRACT

The article takes its point of departure from the concreteness of unexploded ordnance left over from World War II, which in the 2020s runs parallel to an increasing militarisation of the public sphere and a rise in arms production. Old and new weaponry globally endangers lives and environments long after peace accords. This is perhaps not a welcome but a necessary opportunity for cultural researchers to problematise the blind spots in cultural practice and communication surrounding the continued presence of old wars in daily life, and in doing so encourage renewed efforts for peace and disarmament. Working with ethnographic and historical data from Germany, some avenues for such research are suggested first with a case study of a medium-sized city where finds of dangerous war waste still occur frequently. In documenting how new cultural practices are devised to manage difficult and costly bomb diffusions, the effort to normalise what better not be downplayed comes to the fore. Further, a look at language and imagery surrounding the experts carrying out the bomb diffusions points to the foregrounding of hero narratives. The efforts of countless volunteers receeds into the background,

* The article draws partially on a project conducted from April 2023 through April 2024 in Göttingen in cultural anthropology/European ethnology with the four MA students Viviane Depping, Jasmin Dreessen, Monika Reichardt and Claudia Wernicke as well as the exhibit and pamphlet we generated (Author Collective 2024). Some of the material I presented in German at the university of Mainz at the invitation of Carna Brkovic in July 2024; a differently focused paper was presented at the SIEF congress in June 2023 in Brno; an English presentation was given at a seminar for ethnologists in Visby, Gotland, in September 2024. Thanks go to the two anonymous reviewers of the *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics*, and to Art Leete for regularly reminding me that I should finally submit an article to *JEF*. Further thanks go to Christina Hinzmann for permission to use two of her photos as illustrations, and to Marcus Rausch from Lower Saxony's KBD – the removal service for combat devices – for providing and granting permission for some of the illustrations.

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as does the necessary evacuation of citizens to create a space within which the work takes place and the real and complex craft skill needed for the task unfolds. Finally, the focus turns to the unpredictable agency of eighty-year-old bombs for which the categorisation 'heritage out of control' is recommended – an inheritance whose existence humanity should eradicate and forestall.

KEYWORDS: waste of war ● unexploded ordnance ● militarisation ● crafts of undoing weaponry ● inheritance ● heritage out of control ● normalisation of danger ● heroisation ● artistic intervention

In Johann Wolfgang Goethe's (1998 [1798]) poem "The Sorcerer's Apprentice", the apprentice initially relishes his skills in animating the tools needed to complete his chores without his master's presence. Soon, however, he realises that he lacks the skill to stop water pail and broom, and stands helplessly as they create havoc. The hapless apprentice calls out: "Spirits that I've cited my commands ignore." The poem captures the pitfalls of human inventiveness particularly in the industrial era: progress in some realms produces unforeseen, in some cases harmful, consequences; to undo them, repair or new 'magic' in the form of further innovation and skill are needed, and in many cases the long-term problems they cause are understood only long after their inventors and their production knowledge have passed away. Industrial weapons and their short-sighted deployment are perhaps the most painful case in point. Chemical weapons, though forbidden since their devastating use in World War I still cause environmental harm more than a century later. Atomic bombs continue to be produced as a 'deterrent' despite the unfathomable death and destruction they demonstrated in World War II. Carpets of landmines and strings of naval mines remain undetected and deadly for decades after wars. This is also the case with the long period delayed detonator bombs resting in the ground after World War II – the type of unexploded ordnance that gave occasion for the present article: they bored into soft ground on impact and their mechanical-chemical fuses failed to detonate. When discovered many decades later in construction ventures, the knowledge of various types of eighty-year-old bombs and how to prevent their detonation, how to prevent the harm they once were meant to create, has become extremely rare.

Since January 2021, Göttingen, a German city of about 120,000 inhabitants, has had six controlled detonations of unexploded ordnance from World War II. Five of them were planned well in advance, with roughly one tenth of the population evacuated from the affected city district. One bomb was an accidental find in the old botanical garden and required a speedy evacuation this time of the inner city and environs within less than ten hours. The last evacuation took place on October 12, 2024 and more are sure to follow, as aerial photographs from 1944 and 1945 point to many further spots where the Allies dropped bombs with delay fuses, some of which failed to detonate at the time. During the most recent event, three unexploded bombs were detonated on the former fairgrounds. The search for other unexploded ordnance will be taken up during 2025. At the time of writing, the clean-up from the last, particularly difficult, detonation is still in progress. The groundwater table had to be lowered and major infrastructurally relevant cables needed to be rerouted. The by now established security construction with nearly one hundred water filled shipping containers was heavily damaged and took a great effort to disentangle and remove. The containers serve as buffers for the

explosion's shockwave, protecting surrounding buildings. The total cost exceeded two million Euro – funds that were not planned for in the city budget.

Only two weeks prior to the announcement of a new evacuation date for October 12, 2024, there was a press release from the German arms manufacturer and automotive supplier Rheinmetall. Founded in 1889, the company has had a chequered history, with predictable highs in World War I and especially in World War II, when it was completely nationalised and employed forced labourers. Machine guns, automatic cannons and ammunition were produced again as early as 1956. The Ukraine War brought the company the largest order in its history. Rheinmetall was already looking for more staff in 2023, for instance with cinema advertising ahead of blockbusters such as *Guardians of the Galaxy*. In the pre-Christmas period in 2023, such advertising was occasionally shown together with advertising for the Bundeswehr, the German Armed Forces. It is the Ukraine war, too, that prompted the German Chancellor to speak of a turning point in 2024 – indicating a need for potential readiness for war. Since 2011, the German army has relied on voluntary service. Over the past year, however, the army has been recruiting intensively in schools as well as other places. There is criticism from teachers, students, and parents who justly regard schools as a realm not to be entangled with militarisation, but there is no broad protest (Friedrichs 2024). Since late autumn 2023, Defence Minister Boris Pistorius has called for Germany to build a "readiness to defend ourselves".[1] There are thus plenty of indications of a societal militarisation that is transforming from latent to overt.[2]

This juxtaposition is the point of departure for the question of how cultural research might engage in what are not just metaphorical but real minefields: eighty-year-old weapons continue to pose grave danger and create exorbitant cost, and new weapons promise great profit, pose grave danger, and long term destruction. Placed next to one another, and bracketing the given political rationale for weapons deployment, the destructive circle is immediately obvious. But in everyday life, this constitutes a backdrop at best, an occasional inconvenience in the case of the old bombs, an apparent necessity in the case of weapons production (and for some a welcome economic investment), with both largely taken care of in a smoothly coordinated administrative effort that causes little disturbance. What citizens prefer is a state in which everything runs smoothly, relying on administrations and services to keep them safe and not disturb their day-to-day affairs.

As a folklorist and ethnologist, I have started to invest myself in this topic. Our fields are focused on everyday life, past and present, and within everyday life, old and new weaponry are no everyday matter. Ethnographic attention to practices of normalisation and 'invisibilisation' offer possibilities to generate awareness and possibly resistance to what militarisation carries with it – depletion of resources for weapons production, war games that in the best case 'only' cause environmental harm, but in the worst case bring death and destruction in addition to long-term if not irreversible effect on the planet.

There is a backdrop of studies that have outlined how getting used to new things – habitualisiation or normalisation – is part and parcel of the human condition.[3] Already in 1961 Hermann Bausinger (1990 [1961]) had demonstrated how vernacular culture integrated the products of industrialisation and technological innovation. After initial anxieties, expressed for instance in legends, everything from coal driven steam trains, electricity, to automobiles and household appliances became part of what Bausinger

called opening horizons, a research direction that others followed up on, recognising technical innovation as an actant cutting across all realms of cultural research (e.g. Beck 1997; Hengartner and Rolshoven 1998). Scholars such as Jan Garnert (1993) in Sweden and Beate Binder (1999) in Germany have contributed to this direction as well with works on electrification and its impact on everyday life. Donna Haraway, with her concept of the cyborg (1991), similarly showed how the non-human and technical increasingly became part of how humans shape their lives and even their bodies. Today, this has been updated in our disciplines under the headings of grid life and ethnographies of infrastructure (e.g., Star 1999; Muehlebach 2023).

There are some things and conditions, however, that cannot be absorbed in extant ways of life, and some, I posit, should not be habitualised. Although dealing with weaponry, I draw on Ina Dietzsch's (2024) thinking regarding habitualisation processes of the present. Her work deals with digitisation and automation. She argues that change in the realm of technology unfolds with such speed and breadth that one can no longer assume a steady internalisation leading to normalisation. In her article "Moments of Posthuman Habitualisation," she states: "Habitualisation I understand more as an assemblage of stabilising and routinising that which is extraordinary and disruptive" (ibid.: 207, here and hereafter my translations). In other words, there is so much to absorb, that superficial habitualisation affords the semblance of stability – which in our heart of hearts we know is not there. The growth of militarisation evident in many societies is similarly occasioned by mechanisms of surreptitious habitualisation.[4]

War is a constant presence in human history, but its core characteristics are disruption and destabilisation. The crucial innovation in this long history is industrial weapons' production.[5] In our everyday awareness of new weapons and in their pop-cultural representation such as in films, music videos or video games they are linked but marginally to the real destruction and pain they cause. This is one blind spot to address. The second blind spot is the legacy of weaponry from past wars and their continuous poisoning of seas, soils, and atmosphere. Unexploded ordnance as well as excess munitions that leak TNT and other poisonous substances have an agency cut lose from the actors who threw them out of aeroplanes during a war or who sunk them in oceans and lakes during clean-up activities after a war (see, for instance, Bergmann et al. 2022). It is this autonomy of, for instance, unexploded bombs, that warrants focus. Dorothy Noyes' (2016: 371–397) term "zombie" quite aptly captures this material legacy we keep inheriting from long dead forebears: no longer controlled by those who built them, their material composition may interact in unforeseen ways – giving them agency that was not foreseen. Less poignantly, but far more invasive, are carpets of landmines. Laid during wartime, as much in likely as in unlikely places, they continue to take lives and mutilate bodies. As with unexploded bombs, landmines can remain in the ground for decades and still wield their deadly power when stepped on; techniques and tools to detect them have to be invented and established in new repertoires of post-conflict work. For instance, working with dogs who are especially helpful at detecting where there are no mines, saving money on expensive detection robots (Smith 2021). More debated is the usefulness of so-called Hero Rats (Kalan 2014; Smith 2021).[6] The saying "war is the mother of invention" is thus but a partial assessment: on war's coattails rides the need for inventions to hide or preferably clean up the lasting effects of weaponry.

This article is an effort to write against acquiescing to war's necessary evils and militarisation's insinuation into everyday life. The (not) addressing of wastes of past wars as much as the preparation for new wars and corresponding wastes are deeply shaped cultural practices that warrant the attention of humanities researchers in whatever feeble effort to raise both scholarly and public consciousness. I begin with a case study of handling unexploded ordnance in a midsize German town to show the extent of normalisation and its cost, I then turn to the craft of diffusing bombs placing it in a third move into the larger topic of heritage. I will conclude with a brief survey of extant artistic interventions around war debris and move toward the question of how our disciplines can contribute to peace work.

STORIES OF FORGETTING AND HABITUALISATION: A CASE STUDY

In June 2010, folklorist Valdimar Hafstein called me from Iceland. He asked with grave concern whether everything was okay with us in Göttingen. He had heard about an accident during a bomb diffusion. Three bomb diffusion specialists had died. Like many other Göttingen inhabitants, I had not yet properly heard of the calamity, much as I had registered only marginally that more World War II bombs had been discovered and required diffusion. The phone call made evident just how extraordinary *it should be* to face danger in the 21st century from weaponry deployed during World War II, eighty years prior – and in what nonchalant manner populations enjoying peace and economic stability handle it.

What fell from British and American bombers particularly in 1944–1945 was part of the allied effort intended to destroy industrial sites and traffic hubs used by the German military and thus move closer to the end of a war that Nazi-Germany had started in 1939: in Göttingen, this was the train station, the small military airport built in 1936, a factory producing ball bearings needed for the war effort, as well as a major transport route (Heinzelmann 1999; 2003).[7] The lack of precision in targeting was offset by the massive numbers of bombs dropped. While many did destroy their targets and killed or wounded people, some bombs of the type with delayed detonation failed to explode. They fell into the sea, riverbeds, fields, or, in the case of Göttingen, onto soft ground around a riverbed that gave way to their momentum and weight. Many intact bombs thus disappeared from sight, but they remained in the ground, with their fuses intact.

There is thus far little cultural research by (German) researchers on the lasting danger of war weaponry. There are a few international works from cultural fields addressing war waste (Reno 2019) or war junk (Souchen 2020). In England, for instance, findings of oral history interviews have been presented on the damage and death suffered in the rapid clean-up after the war (e.g., Moshenska 2008; 2010).[8] Archival data attesting to the losses created by unexploded ordnance can easily be found in Germany, but here the societal and scholarly effort has been to grapple with national socialism. Aside from that huge publicly and educationally emphasised guilt, it is the hardship but also the speed of the post-war clean-up and the economic miracle that is present in the public sphere. The burden of old weaponry pokes through this blanket of forgetting, when another so called *Blindgänger* (the German term for unexploded bomb which translates

to 'blind walker') is discovered. In 21st century Germany, unexploded ordnance still requires the expertise of diffusion specialists up to 5,000 times a year, but the events rarely make it beyond the local news.[9] There, it is reported partly in a sensationalist manner and partly as a nuisance, interfering with train schedules and forcing people to evacuate.

Over the years, Göttingen saw a number of diffusions which can be reconstructed through interviews and newspaper reports, and which were handled with relative ease and few precautions. For instance, when a 200 kilogram bomb was diffused on November 12, 1980, next to the highway, the newspaper reported that fortunately drivers passing thirty meters away from it did not know about it (Heinzel 2022). The accident in 2010 changed this perception initially dramatically. The city had begun to clear a former fairground site to prepare the area for building a new sports arena. In the process, sites of suspected bombs were found. One was diffused successfully; the second was set to be dealt with the following day, but then the accident happened. Frank Gloth, vice commander of the Göttingen fire brigade until December 2023, remembered the moment distinctly:

> I won't ever forget this. We sat upstairs, in the second floor of the main fire station. The head of the blasting team from the explosive ordnance disposal service had been there and we had asked whether there was something else to do. No, all was fine. "We are ready, most of the preparation is done." And then all of a sudden. We still had those window doors. And then there was – it was relatively warm – there was a dull bang. I will never forget it. A really dull bang. And a colleague said "What was that?" I said "That must have been the bomb." It could not have been, because it was not ready. And then it lasted, I would say, it felt like one minute or I do not know. Then there was an alarm gong and then our men got going. Actually, this was no longer a situation for the fire brigade. There was nothing to do [for them]. (FM 1: interview with Frank Gloth on September 23, 2023.)

Frank Gloth immediately continued, assessing what has changed:

> But today we work differently. At the time we did not yet subdivide the city in sectors. We have grown, we developed structures and today we have a very clear concept of how we work.… Today, if something like this were to happen, we have a task force, designed specifically to drive into the cordoned off area. That is a structure that was not there, it has grown over the past years. One has become more professional. (Ibid.)

Our small study took up the trail of this emergent 'structure' – as it is the orderly planning that normalises what is extraordinary: what has been learned by the city from the accident? Since when, how and by whom are the waterfilled container barricades erected that are to protect private homes as well as the new sports arena? We aimed to make visible and graspable the major effort behind such bomb diffusion interventions through conversations with responsible individuals in the administration, actors who volunteer during the evacuation days, experts in charge of the actual diffusions, inhabitants of the city district most affected, as well as the local press. Each group of actors has its own knowledge gained through experience of bomb diffusions, and from their given vantage point act and react to every new case. Our goal was to make the uneven-

ness of knowledge and available agency visible and thus lobby for greater acknowledgment both of the assemblage of stabilising and routinising measures on the part of the city and of the extraordinary and disruptive character of each and every evacuation caused by finds of unexploded bombs. Participant observation of the preparation for and execution of the planned evacuation of September 23, 2023 afforded opportunity to witness the ways in which this mammoth undertaking unfolds.

The city had been able to purchase aerial photographs of where bombs were dropped by the Allies, in particular the United States, only in 2020. It is striking that such information must be purchased, with a time lag of 75 years since the war's end. In a humane world one would expect that peace accords lead to sharing information about bomb drops, in whatever form of record keeping available at the time.[10] However, much as weapons innovated, produced, and used, such aerial photography is strategic evidence and thus surrounded by secrecy. The photos pointed to approximately 80 further potential sites of unexploded bombs. The city has not publicised the photos – not just because they were expensive, but because there is concern that public knowledge of where bombs might rest, including on private properties, might generate anxieties and potentially lead to searches by untrained individuals. Secrecy has its place also for strategic civil purposes.[11]

There were overarching, oppositional themes crosscutting through this assemblage of people, institutions, experiences, and unpredictable bomb agency, with safety versus uncertainty and communication versus rumour being deeply connected topics. For the city commissioner in charge of the 'blind walker' bomb task force as well as the leadership of the administrative divisions of order, police, and the fire brigade, safety is the top concern. Next to the labour involved in preparing a potential bomb blast, communication about bomb search activity, and setting the dates for further evacuations is a key component, including which actors at which institutions need to be in the inner circle of information dispersal. School and church as well as mosque leadership are among those informed earlier, so they can prepare properly. The head of the high school located in the evacuation circle remembers well how unstructured earlier evacuations were, in particular in 2010. The final *Abitur*[12] oral exams were interrupted and alternative rooms in another school had to be found overnight to make sure that students could conclude their school at the same time as all other schools in the state. She then lobbied extensively to enter the inner communication circle.

For the media, updates are provided, but from the point of view of the head editor of the newspaper, the information is never complete. In addition to reporting on planning and other aspects with the bomb experts, he thus also publishes articles questioning the limited information provided. The editor is particularly upset that the aerial photographs are not available for public inspection. "Everyone should be able to see it and draw their own conclusions", he argued, citing freedom of information (FM 2: interview with Frerk Schenker, fall 2023). For the city, however, it is part of the safety regime to keep access privileged to the experts dealing with the bomb searches. While at present, the controlled blasting occurs largely on public land for which the city is responsible, suspected sites on private property will require addressing the question of payment. No payment is foreseen from the Federal Republic; the Federal State of Lower Saxony assists with the bomb disposal experts who carry out the searches and the blasting, but otherwise the city finds itself confronted with huge costs. In the case

of bombs on private property, private owners may have to contribute as was the case in 2021 when two bombs were found on the land of one of the churches. Keeping the information in the hands of the city is a measure to forestall rumour.

Communication is the key component in preparing a smooth operation, but rumours and hearsay enter the communication circuit through oral exchanges in the typical manner of rumour and legend diffusion.[13] Despite the administrative efforts to create a sense of safety, uncertainty creeps in through various cracks, brought forth also by differences in social class. Rumour is generated on the bedrock of a lingering as well as overt sense of unfairness experienced by some of the citizens who need to evacuate every time. "Why does the evacuation radius include the train station but not the expensive hotel right next to it?" was a rhetorical question posed by several interviewees, which they then answered with the assumption that, clearly, the rich owner had a deal with the city to not inconvenience his guests. The radius includes one of the housing complexes inhabited largely by recent migrants but not the other (the latter is close to the expensive hotel). Rationally it is thus clear that the radius is territorial and not based on social status, but this does not silence the rumour mill.

Emergency service workers and volunteers circulate their own anecdotes, particularly of individuals who are sick or otherwise immobile who require their help for evacuation. Over the years, some of these cases have become part of common knowledge and long term health and safety actors double check those apartments if no call has come to arrange transport. Relatives of such individuals in turn have their own stories of particularly nice paramedics or particularly gruff telephone assistants in the city's various social services.

The assembly of actors and institutions mobilised is complex and impressive. Preparations begin months ahead of time, the evacuation needs to be complete by 6 am, the explosion may occur toward evening, though sometimes the process lasts up to midnight. Structured processes are a means to control emergencies and thus prevent panic. For unaffected inhabitants in Göttingen this is ideal, as they are but marginally touched by the whole undertaking. Roughly 800 volunteers in addition to professionals (police, official and volunteer fire brigades, and health professionals) facilitate the relative smoothness of the undertaking. An ensemble of cultural practices has been invented to make a potentially disorienting and highly dangerous undertaking practically unnoticeable for all but the about 11,000 people in a city of 120,000 who are evacuating or assisting the evacuation, and keeping the grounds free of disturbance. For those who have to evacuate, it is inconvenient, costly, and, depending on the social circumstances, bewildering. The affected area is mainly working class and lower middle class: the wealthy neighbourhoods of Göttingen were materially hardly touched by the war, the bombed areas were quickly rebuilt with modest row houses for the working class families needed in the industrial recovery. Many of these individuals have friends or relations in nearby villages with whom they can stay; others use the occasion to spend a weekend elsewhere – the cost of which they have to carry themselves. A school with expansive grounds outside the evacuation radius is transformed into an evacuation centre, with classrooms doubling as potential sleeping halls, meals provided throughout, medical as well as psychological health care workers on site, and for those who reserve it in advance, tents and cages for dogs, cats and other pets. Among long-term residents, the evacuation centre carries the stigma of being 'for those who

really have no other option', which translates into socially isolated and psychologically impaired individuals as well as recent migrants. Since 2015, the number of refugees housed in Göttingen has risen sharply, much as in many other German cities. In addition to about 1,500 individuals who fled the Syrian civil war and other sites of conflict in the Middle East, there are about 2,500 refugees from Ukraine due to Russia's invasion of their home country in 2022. A good number of evacuees using the official evacuation centre are thus recent migrants and refugees, for some of whom the need to escape from the dangers of old weaponry blends uneasily with personal experiences of the ongoing wars they have fled.

Photo 1. A protective wall of shipping containers filled with water built next to Göttingen's sports arena with additional materials still to be installed before the controlled explosion on September 23, 2023, as seen from a neighbourhood bicycle path. Photo by the author.

Photo 2. Posters placed around the areas that need to be evacuated several weeks before the event in Göttingen. Photo by the author.

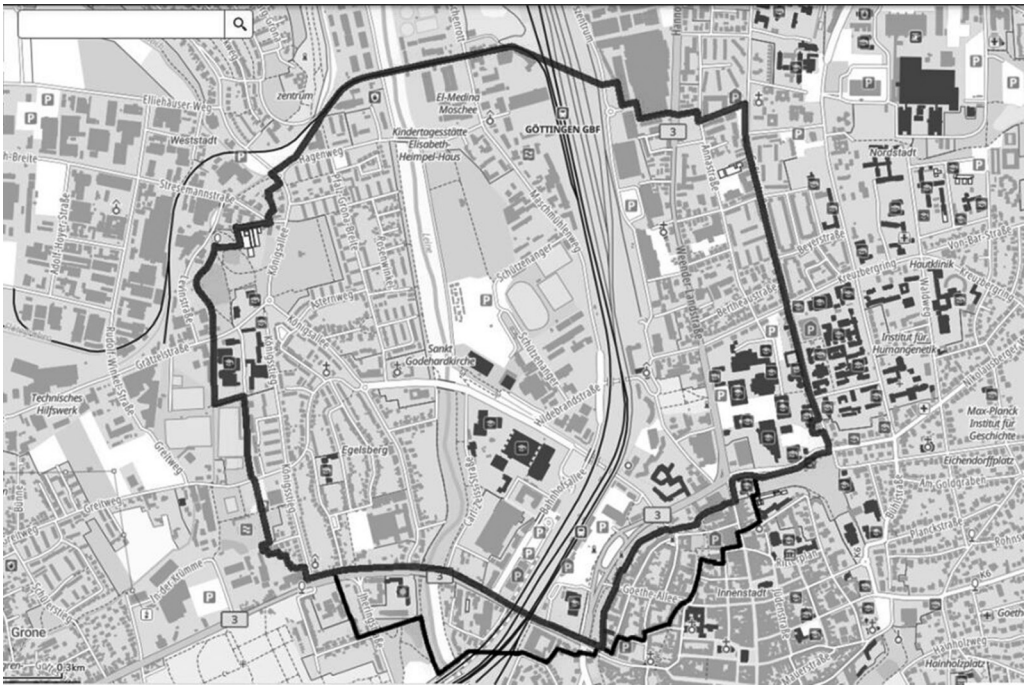

Figure 1. Göttingen evacuation radius for October 12, 2024. Inside the marked zone, all inhabitants were to evacuate. The outer line marks a safety buffer zone: inhabitants could stay indoors but clear from the windows. The map was printed as well as distributed digitally throughout the city, including the university.

In addition to large posters along the streets and information in the bus stops, the community centre, schools and religious institutions, the city distributes leaflets to all households in German and English and – most recently – 14 further languages via QR code. But there is no guarantee that they reach and are read by everyone. Phonelines are staffed to inform and arrange for assistance weeks ahead of time and until the bombs have been safely detonated. Those who know the 'routine' generally leave the night before to meet the 6 am deadline. Between 5 and 6 am, free shuttle buses take those who are still there to the evacuation centre. As of 6 am, volunteer fire brigades and other volunteer and rescue organisations, along with police, comb through every street, and ring every door bell to make sure that everyone is on safe ground. As of 8 or 9 am, the bomb disposal experts start their work. Some individuals and families stay in their homes, turn off the lights and hide behind closed curtains or in the basement. Reasons mentioned range from frailty to concern over pets to simply arguing that it is all too much of a bother, that the protective measures are so good at this point that the evacuation radius could be much smaller. Since 2023, the city has confronted such refusals with a heavy fine – provided individuals are caught; the same counts for those who cross into the area when it is cordoned off.

None of this busy activity impacts the rest of the city, not least because the evacuations are scheduled for Saturdays when people are off work. The buses may not run their regular route and the train station is shut down, thus bothering at best travellers. But even for them, shuttle buses travel to train stations in adjoining towns where express trains stop to pick up people booked from Göttingen – and all of it is made known both in print and digitally weeks ahead of time. For those who stay at home, a regular Saturday unfolds, with fresh bread from the corner bakery, open downtown stores, and the weekend vegetable market in full swing.

Photo 3. A World War II bomb freed up and prepared for a controlled explosion by the KBD, the Lower Saxony combat device removal service. Photo curtesy of the KBD Lower Saxony.

Photo 4. Controlled explosion of three World War II bombs in Göttingen on October 24, 2024. Photo by Christina Hinzmann.

Photo 5. Aerial view of the Göttingen sites shown in Photo 1, after the controlled explosion of September 23, 2023. Photo curtesy of the KBD Lower Saxony.

Photo 6. Start of the clean-up of more than one hundred fully or partially destroyed water-filled containers after the controlled explosion in Göttingen on October 24, 2025. Photo by Christina Hinzmann.

A first suggestion of how ethnologists and folklorists can bring the burdens of old wars into public awareness is thus collecting narratives circulating among different groups of actors, and making these flows visible. In our case study, we hoped to dissipate some of the ill will, and some of the conspiratorial whispers among those most encumbered by evacuations. Similarly, those in charge were meant to understand how language barriers, cultural habits as well as social isolation give rise to the kind of behaviour that law enforcement and relief agencies regard with concern and occasional exasperation or scorn. Most of all, we hoped to raise awareness and productive irritation among those who have the luxury to be unaffected: the presence of volatile eighty-year-old weaponry should matter to all of us. Emplacing an awareness of active old war debris in everyday life instead of sweeping it away can make it a factor in the politics of the present. We have not succeeded in neutralising chemicals, landmines, and decaying live munition in the ground and in water, producing new weapons in preparedness for potential defensive needs will add to the degradation and liveability of the only planet we have.

THE ART OF DIFFUSING BOMBS

Another ethnological approach toward the challenges of unexploded ordnance concerns the concrete bundles of knowledge entailed in rendering the danger harmless. It is a sphere of skill the general public knows at best from films and other forms of popular culture. In 2008, director Katheryn Bigelow won an Oscar for *Hurt Locker*. The

film opens with the quote "War is a drug" and focuses on the thrill entailed in finding and diffusing dangerous bombs. *Hurt Locker* is set in Iraq, and we witness bomb diffusion specialists working in war time in enemy terrain. The film problematizes the addictive and highly gendered bundle of skill, courage, and daring that come together in detecting and diffusing bombs. Old and more recent television footage examined may be slightly more sober than this feature film, but the tendency to emphasise the heroism that accompanies the skill in finding, correctly identifying and undoing an explosive device remains strong. For instance, a 1961 German documentary entitled *Fireworker Merz* largely focuses on how a professional is drawn away from his peaceful garden work, with wife and son anxiously awaiting his return, while he pursues the dangerous task of identifying and diffusing a bomb found in a large city. The voice-over comments on the protagonist's calm demeanour, and his sense of responsibility, but it also includes the sentence "this thrill keeps driving him to his bombs.… This man is not just a bomb diposal expert, he is also a hunter." (Zimmermann 1961) The atmosphere of danger, and the instinctive dimension of 'sniffing out' unexploded ordnance contributes to the heroic profile, and also points to the recognition of such zombie bombs' own agency, addressed further below.

Recent documentaries are more sober in tone, but woven into the interviews is the element of danger and the practitioners' knowledge that every time they are called to a bomb, there is the potential to die. To a viewing public, what is mediated about these experts is generally less their bundles of specialised and tacit knowledge and skill, and more the manly sense of responsibility for the common good.[14] One documentary (Rubner 2019) includes among its interlocutors one of the bomb disposal experts who survived the 2010 accident in Göttingen. His recollections of the event emphasise the bodily, sensory and affective impact of the unexpected explosion, including the arduous path of rehabilitation. But the interview also foregrounds this individual's determination to return to his job and shows his current work in diffusing weaponry found and pulled out of the North Sea.

A website describing the work for prospective apprentices (*Azubiyo* n.d.) lists the required qualities for bomb disposal experts as follows: keeping a cool head in stressful situations, willing to take responsibility, encounter technically complex situations with poise and confidence, and take the lead in project groups. The professionals at the heart of the endeavour interviewed in our project also emphasised the need for a calm disposition and professionalism, and repeatedly cautioned that daredevils and fearnoughts were not cut out for the job. Yet in the local imagination of Göttingen citizens, it is only these men who are known by name, further aided by the local newspaper's efforts to interview them regularly before and after evacuations. In Göttingen, Thorsten Lüdeke is the public face of controlled explosions. He is not the only one involved in this most dangerous work on site, but he is the one for whom some locals said they were praying every time he is in action, and about whom they know family details. Lüdeke exudes manliness, is tattooed, has a military haircut, is easy going and gifted in talking in understandable ways about his work. To locals, he personifies what is to be done, arguably because he matches the popular characteristics of the heroic familiar from popular culture and thus stands out among the legion of people busy with preparing and safeguarding the site.

Photo 7. Thorsten Lüdeke, one of the bomb disposal experts employed by the Lower Saxony combat device removal service during a press interview in October 2024 in Göttingen. Photo by Christina Hinzmann.

However, one can and should look at the job that is variously called "pyrotechnician", "shot firer", "dynamiter" or "blaster" from the perspective of a rare craft. It is a craft deserving of nomination as intangible heritage and is probably hampered by the same secrecy involved in weapons production. When three such specialists died during the 2010 accident in Göttingen, it was the loss of expertise and skill particularly of the oldest among them that was emphasised and mourned. Although the craft consists here of undoing what others have made, there is new tacit knowledge acquired with each diffusion incident that augments the level of skill, as Michael Polany (1966) and Trevor Marchand (2012), among others, have shown for other crafts (cf. Bendix 2023). There are roughly 300 types of bombs from World War II to recognise by type, but there are endless possibilities of how such bombs are situated in the ground or under water. With every successful mission, an explosive ordnance disposal unit acquires more tacit knowledge to draw on for every future call.

There are some weapon-related crafts on intangible heritage lists, such as sword making. Swords are weapons of chivalrous warfare of the past, admired in reenactments and countless movies as a thing of the past. Bombs and mines remain part of present-day defence arsenals, often associated with patents and generating enormous income for those who hold them. There is thus little likelihood of these exclusive and elusive skills landing on a heritage list, although they arguably contribute to sustainability, a catchword adopted in the operational guidelines of UNESCO's Intangible Heritage Convention and leading to the inclusion of avalanche risk management on the list.[15] Making visible those whose skill safeguards lives and environments ought to

contribute to counteract the secrecy surrounding old weaponry and turn such bomb diffusion events into a remembrance of the ills of war and a contribution to addressing the militarisation of the present.

WEAPONRY, HERITAGE, AND INHERITANCE

Unexploded ordnance is an interesting case of materials and knowledge outside of heritage lists and memory work, yet an undeniable inheritance. Like most inheritances, one cannot decline to accept it in contrast to heritage making which is generally a matter of choice. Certified sites of dark heritage like concentration camps (Feldman 2010) offer clearly marked places and times of mourning, remembrance, and penance. Old and yet live weaponry is incalculable and can force its way into everyday life at any moment. These objects are not part of collective memorial activity. Rather, they burst into the local news, leading to an unfolding of the complex structures described before which normalise the event and to some extent cover over shame – of wars fought, the unfinished clean-up, the carelessness of prior generations. David Henig (2012: 23) has worked on unexploded ordnance in the South Balkans and notes that war debris differs from other material memories in that it does not form part of a great collective narrative. Much as the craft skills of pyrotechnicians, this is a blind spot in memory work that makes military debris so very dangerous – on top of the fact that it is the most dangerous waste humans produce (Reno 2019). Building on McGrath's sourcebook on landmines, Henig (2012: 23) states:

> The impact of military waste upon individuals and collectives is far-reaching and has effects on macro and micro, material and emotional, and personal and structural scales alike (McGrath 2000: 29–73). Its presence preserves uncertainty and a degree of social dysfunction in post-conflict societies.

Precisely because war debris and the work entailed in it are not part of the heritage apparatus, they are – in their moral ambiguity – a good starting point to think through the logic of heritage categories and public remembrance. With the Hague Convention of 1954, international measures were gradually formulated to protect cultural property in the context of armed conflict and to combat the illegal trade in cultural property.[16] Within UNESCO, these measures are closely linked to the increasing valorisation and creation of a canon of cultural heritage. However, post-conflict clean-up, which poses a clear and present danger to cultural property as well as to all forms of life in general, remains in a grey zone, not only because military waste is often invisible, but also because the responsibility for its removal ultimately lies with those who inhabit the site, perhaps but not always with national or international support. Questions of blame and retribution do little to address the task of locating and removing unexploded bombs (Henig 2012).

One of the key elements in the establishment of value regimes, as represented by the numerous UNESCO conventions on cultural heritage, are the "Operational Guidelines" (UNSCO 2024). Not only do they serve to legitimise the bureaucratic procedures through which a site or cultural practice can attain heritage status, but they also provide guidance on how to interpret the heritage conventions in order to arrive at charac-

teristics that legitimise heritage value (cf. Bendix 2018: 96–195). UNESCO's numerous selection bodies are constantly adapting their operational guidelines to provide fixed parameters for the nomination and selection of cultural heritage sites and practices. In this way, a standard can be set for, for example, outstanding qualities, rarity, significance in comparison to others of similar quality, historical positionality, community support and so forth. The guidelines ensure that only the best or most representative examples agreed upon are recognised as cultural heritage (Hafstein 2018; Brumann 2021). Similarly, events commemorating battles, revolutions, independence, etc., are achieved through dynamic processes of negotiation within a given polity. This in effect controls which victory and which loss or transformative event should be added to the "archive of the future" (cf. Appadurai 2003).

With this in mind, we should ask ourselves what it is about left-over weapons that they are not included in this circuit and how they might contribute to critique the apparatus of our multiple heritage regimes. A number of terms have been generated to refer to unpleasant or problematic heritage: dark heritage (which emerged from the term "dark tourism", cf. Thomas et al. 2019), difficult heritage (Macdonald 2009), undesirable heritage (Macdonald 2006), or uncomfortable heritage (Samida 2013). All of these terms surfaced from the recognition that what we carry with us from the past is not all worthy of celebration and awe, but nonetheless requires remembrance. War waste such as unexploded ordnance perhaps even more so than concentration camps and sites of torture and injustice requires worldwide attention, because it is cut lose from the human actors who invented and deployed it and harbours its own, unpredictable zombie-like agency. A group of young scholars suggested the term "heritage out of control" for a workshop where I had the honour to present a first stab at unexploded ordnance (Bendix 2022; İlengiz et al. 2022). The term appears eerily apt for war waste. In their unexploded existence, they embody both materially and ideologically Ernst Bloch's (1985 [1935]) much-quoted "simultaneity of the non-simultaneous". Their action, or rather the action of their chemical components, points to the loss of human control, the finite nature of the specialised knowledge that brought them forth, and a series of human errors and environmental conditions on the way to a given present. Their uncontrolled sustainability should place them at the centre of attention, particularly in a time like ours that witnesses several enormously destructive wars which in turn generate rapid arms development and production. They cause environmental damage and contribute continuously and heavily to global warming. This would then be a further concretisation of my plea to address the legacy of war: from the perspective of new materialism, war waste should be recognised as a cultural inheritance over which we have lost control, but for whose destructive power we bear responsibility. The costs that this responsibility entails should be borne to a greater extent by global society and its institutions that are by name devoted to security, climate, and health.

Placing the concrete legacy of war, specifically the enormous and real wastes of war, centrally into the research field of Heritage Studies ought to be a worthy form of ethnological engagement. In my first article on matters of heritage, presented at a symposium that the late Barbro Klein organised in 1998, I suggested examining the linkages between the terms heredity, hybridity, and heritage (Bendix 2000). I would add to my old critique of the term heritage a preference for the term inheritance. We cannot shirk responsibility for what we inherit. One might think that the loud call for peace and

the slogan "never again!" after the two great wars of the 20th century would last, but weapon innovation and industrial production continued nearly unabated – and these in turn outpace the invention of techniques to undo the damage, potential or already effective, of war waste.

Within cultural and social anthropology, there has been important work focusing on militarisation in recent years (Gonzáles et al. 2019; Gusterson and Bestemann 2019). Bringing this strand of research together with the heritage out of control of past wars would be a productive road for making visible the inherent connection between the invisibilisation of past yet lasting war dangers and new, impending dangers of filling arsenals and militarising populations.

PEACE WORK: ARTISTIC INTERVENTIONS AROUND WAR DEBRIS

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention to artistic interventions and museum work addressing such inheritances of war. It is an avenue that may be effective in harnessing public interest and reenergising peace activism, and it is one to which ethnologists can contribute. Wars erupt because human beings are not sufficiently using the gift that is supposedly unique to our species: language and with it the possibility to talk, to negotiate, to clarify, to mediate – all of which could be considered means of defusing aggression and anxiety. The project I carried out with students about Göttingen 'blind walkers' was entitled *entschärfen*, a German term for defusing or disarming that can be used both for calming down strife with communication and for defusing weaponry. We then called our exhibition Diffusing War? Everything We Do Not (Want To) See, and our posters and texts sought to visually stimulate thinking about the absurd situation we find ourselves in: still disarming eighty-year-old weapons while producing new ones for new wars. The exhibition was shown for the month of April 2024 in the foyer of one of our university's teaching and office buildings, and provided various opportunities for visitors to respond. There were thank you notes, as well as comments on how thought provoking some of the viewers found the posters (FM 2: exhibit materials). Among the notes left was one that read "The worst that humankind has to offer cast in a mould." Another stated "Weapons are cultural goods [*Kulturgüter*]" – to which someone responded "That is how I see it as well," although a further person had reacted with:

> If weapons are cultural goods for you, I do not want to know what kind of culture you live in. Weapons are tools of (systematic) destruction which cause only suffering, not just for humans but also for flora and fauna. "With weapons of the spirit against the spirit of weapons." [17]

One of the posters presented groups working for peace and against the armament industry – and here some commentators engaged in "left bashing" – identifying peace activism automatically as a left-wing activity. Overall, considerable interest was raised, and in the autumn of 2024, at least some of the posters could be shown in the limited space of the community centre in the part of Göttingen that is most affected by evacuations. [18]

This small-scale research and exhibit endeavour in Göttingen drew inspiration from a number of research exhibits and art endeavours in the realm of war waste and weaponry. Some were case studies carried out by museums or individual researchers, others came from different types of artist and art collective as well as from fellow anthropologists. Mitholz was an exhibition created by cultural geographer and curator Barbara Keller about a Swiss mountain village that will be evacuated due to the legacy of war on a mountain flank. Although Switzerland was neutral during both World Wars, the country was ready to defend itself and was correspondingly heavily armed, using especially mountain caverns and underground tunnels and rooms in the alps to create shelters, potential sites to hide, and most of all to store weapons. Near Mitholz, an enormous explosion of such remnants of war preparedness detonated before Christmas in 1947, destroying many houses and killing nine people. The cause of the explosion could not be conclusively determined, the mountainside where a great deal of munition remained, was sealed, and houses were rebuilt. In 2018, the Swiss federal government reopened the investigation and the decision was made that the entire village needed to be evacuated for two or more decades. The exhibition, Reflecting on Home [*Heimat*], was created together with residents of Mitholz. They archived fragments of their village in its materiality, atmosphere, and attitude to life; a farewell song was created and performed at the opening of the exhibition and afterwards filled an empty auditorium space within the museum whenever visitors walked through (Di Falco and Keller 2022). The research leading up to the exhibition also captured the profusion of conflicting expertise surrounding the best possible way to stabilise what – in the course of almost eighty years – has become an ever more unpredictable environment.[19]

The Danish cultural anthropologist and historian Mads Daugbjerg (2023) has not only written a book on the legacy of war and cultural heritage, he also curated an exhibition on the war in Afghanistan and, like other experts, worked with abandoned war bunkers and supported their staging as places of remembrance and activity. A photographic intervention was offered by Italian photo documentarian Rocco Rorandelli. Twenty years after the wars in the break-up of Yugoslavia, he captured mine clean-up work and the 'safe' paths that emerged in the process in his portfolio Mineland (see Rorandelli n.d.). Around 150,000 weapons of war remain in the region – they surround Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and are in Kosova, Serbia and Croatia. Here, as in other countries, people lose limbs and incur other traumatic injuries long after war's end. Rorandelli combines his aerial images of fractured landscapes with those of human injuries. His images bring home the unwanted sustainability of devastation.

The works of the Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei are among the most powerful anti-war and war related refugee crises interventions. His giant wallpaper History of Bombs in London's War Museum is also part of a set of works that he brought together in the book *Ai WeiWei: Bare Life* (Eckmann 2019).[20] War equipment already featured prominently in another of his wallpapers, Odyssey, for an exhibit in Palermo, which strikingly emphasises the connection between war and flight.[21]


SELF-DEFENSE
men otemje

Photos 8–10. Market goods such as fish and broccoli fused with weaponry: porcelain pieces exhibited by the Britto Art Trust from Dahka, Bangladesh, during Documenta 15, in 2022, in Kassel. Photos by the author.

Less famous but impressive from the angles on everyday life in ethnographic fields are foodstuffs made of porcelain, intermingling with weapons also made of the same material. They were made by the Britto Arts Trust from Dakha, Bangladesh, and featured as part of Documenta 15 in 2022 in Kassel. Weapons were hidden among broccoli and tomatoes, fish, Nutella and milk cartons. Displayed in a large market stall, the 'goods' made of porcelain – a material so fragile – emphasise the frailty and vulnerability of everyday life when everyday life is exposed to war. Simultaneously, porcelain once fired becomes indestructible in the sense that it does not decompose; like unexploded ordnance, it outlives its maker.[22]

Finally, attention is to be drawn to the works of Leah Zani, a freelance writer and cultural anthropologist. She did research in Laos and wrote two works, *Bomb Children* (2019) and *Strike Patterns* (2022), which grew out of her work with demolition experts and villagers in Laos. She blends her own poems and a strong ethnographic voice with drawings, and brings the enormity of the situation in Laos to life before our eyes. More bombs fell in Laos during the Vietnam War than during the entirety of World War II in Europe – even though war was never declared on Laos during that interminable conflict. The land was heavily mined and people are still injured by landmines while working in the fields. Zani (2019: 148) captured the following quote from an expert in landmine and bomb identification and demolition: "The war is not over, only the

paperwork is finished". This will also have to be said about a potential end to the war in Ukraine. It is already estimated that it will take more than seventy years to clean up the war waste on the land and in the Black Sea.

Do such interventions help to shake us out of our habitualisation, to uncover the blind spots both socially and professionally, to focus on the legacy of war as a contribution to imagine a future of peace that contrasts the sustainability of weapons with the sustainability of reason? Because we need reason in order to confront the speed of militarisation and readiness for war. Combining poetic and artistic work with ethnological and folkloristic research is a promising way forward.

Coda[23]

There never was a good war or a bad peace.
Benjamin Franklin, 1783[24]

I am not only a pacifist but a militant pacifist. I am willing to fight for peace. Nothing will end war unless the peoples themselves refuse to go to war.
Albert Einstein, 1931[25]

NOTES

1 An interview November 12, 2023 in the German daily news (*Tagesschau* 2023), following a presentation in parliament, first saw Pistorius' call for war readiness.

2 The homepage of the German Army features further information on youth information officers (see Federal Ministry of Defence n.d.).

3 One could summarise this with the long used coupling of the terms tradition and innovation, or, in this case, innovation and traditionalisation. At present, though, the term transformation and the corresponding field transformation studies (with a large component in political science and economics) have taken up this place.

4 In an article focused on changes in police practices, Stephanie Schmidt and Philipp Knopp (2018) define militarisation as "the development of organizational schemata (habitus) of perception, interpretation and practice". Schmidt's ongoing postdoc research on artificial intelligence in weapon's production and testing should prove an important contribution to the field the present article is sketching.

5 The number of studies published by NATO alone – of which Byrnes 2009 is one of countless examples – demonstrates the enormous scientific effort needed to address the undoing of what was once invented for warfare. My university library holds 42 volumes just for the NATO Science for Peace and Security Series published between 2007 and 2014. NATO's website offers more information (NATO n.d.).

6 As Kalan (2014) states: "Removing mines is actually the easiest part of de-mining. The hardest part is finding out where they are." Demining hero Rat Magawa made headlines when he passed away at the age of 8 in 2022 (CNW 2022).

7 For more information on what was housed and developed in this small Nazi-built airport or *Fliegerhorst*, see *Relikte* n.d. Göttingen was highly suitable for the development and testing of aerodynamic vessels, as there was a center for aerodynamic development there since 1906, today called *Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt* (ibid.).

8 Astrid Tuisk (2018) presents archival evidence regarding children playing with war debris from the point of view of whether such activity can be classified as games.

9 In the city of Hamburg alone, 30,000 pieces of unexploded ordnance have been found since 1945. The year 2025 started with an evacuation in the city of Hanau where on January 15 a 250 kilogram bomb had to be diffused; in 2024, there were major, that is newsworthy, bomb evacuations among others in Frankfurt, Mainz and Berlin.

10 One reviewer of this paper pointed out that Russia does not share information about its unexploded ordnance in territories of countries it once fought and/or occupied. Aerial photography may not have been available to all states participating in World War II, although accounting for the number of weapons deployed, when, and where probably existed. In the 2020s with many bomb drops carried out by drones and the available computer logs ought to be extremely precise.

11 Secrecy is a central component of war preparation and conduct which I am not developing further in this article. However, the practice of crafting secrets and building relationships around it are an elementary cultural technique that warrants further study, particularly in the context of understanding the growth of endangerment but also in 'simple' human relations. Regarding approaches to secrecy, consider Simmel 1950 [1908]; Bendix 2003; 2016; Aiello 2015.

12 The *Abitur* is the concluding exam sequence in a German gymnasium, passing it allows admittance to study at a university.

13 The classic study on the dynamics of legend and rumour diffusion is by Linda Dègh and Andrew Vaszony (1970), later expanded by Dègh (2001). The subsequent work on legend, rumour, and most recently conspiracy theory is legion, consulting the proceedings and further publications of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research is a good entry (see ISCLR n.d.).

14 It would be helpful to expand work connecting the linkages to how soldiers and veterans are regarded in the present (fireworkers are often recruited from the military). Sørensen 2015 may be a good starting point, as she also connects the perspective on veterans to issues of secrecy.

15 Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who pointed me to the 2018 inscription of "avalanche risk management" on UNESCO's ICH list (cf. UNESCO n.d.).

16 On the sequence of protection of cultural property in conflict, cf. Roehrenbeck 2010: 193–197. Mark Dunkley, Lisa Mol and Anna Tulliach (2024) produced a collection of papers tending particularly to repairing and forestalling heritage damage.

17 The concluding statement reads in German "Mit den Waffen des Geistes gegen den Geist der Waffen" and is derived from Einstein's various letters and speeches on militant pacifism (cf. Nathan and Norden 1963); it was rendered in this more poignant form by former resistance fighter and *Konzentrationslager* (KZ, internment camp) internee Martin Löwenberg in 2011 and widely used in German student efforts to introduce a "civil clause" in university constitutions that would forbid weapons research (Pineau 2015).

18 The project has been made available digitally on the page *Kulturerbe Niedersachsen*.

19 The exhibition ran from 2022 to spring 2024 at the ALPS museum in Bern, Switzerland. Some impressions of the exhibition are still available online (see SAM 2023).

20 History of Bombs was shown at the Imperial War Museum in London, small glimpses of the giant wall paper remain visible online (IWM n.d.).

21 Odyssey by Weiwei is but one among many of his works addressing refugees (see *FP Magazine* 2017).

22 Thanks go to one of the reviewers who offered this compelling insight.

23 One peer reviewer urged me to consider that in the face of aggression such as that of Nazi Germany, there was no other way than to fight back. When I have presented this material, I have received similar comments. Yet, to quote the refrain from Sting's 1985 song "Russians", produced a few years before the end of the Cold War: "There is no monopoly of common sense on either side of the political fence." In the 2020s, the time of this writing, proto-fascist parties and individuals are democratically elected; the United Nations prove powerless, though the organisation was formed to forestall wars such as World Wars I and II from ever happening again. Post-war normalisation is a powerful engine of forgetting, but unexploded ordnance forces us to remember

and to foresee; they have the capacity to mobilise for peace and to address the crisis that truly matters – the degradation of the environment. A rethinking of the UN along the lines Einstein already argued for is a necessary component of the kind of peace activism humanity needs: a global governmental body that skips states' parties and their ideological, historically secured interests (for Einstein's many statements on peace, on the misconstruction of the United Nations, on the military mentality and its ills, cf. Nathan and Norden 1963).

24 Cited from The Franklin Institute n.d.

25 Cited from Nathan and Norden 1963: 125.

SOURCES

FM 1 = Author's fieldwork materials from 2021–2024; fieldnotes and interviews are in the author's possession. Names of interviewees are disclosed when they are public figures in the fieldwork region.

FM 2 = Fieldwork materials assembled between May 2023 and April 2024 in the course of an MA level study project the author carried out with the four students Viviane Depping, Jasmin Dreessen, Monika Reichardt and Claudia Wernicke. This includes interviews, photos, pamphlets, as well as the posters and supporting materials for a one-month exhibition at the University of Göttingen, Germany. The materials are housed in the archive of the Institute for Cultural Anthropology/European Ethnology at the university of Göttingen.

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