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Memory of the Great Hunger Years Revisited - Finland's 1860s Famine Memorials, Mass Graves and a Commemorative Craft Initiative

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Abstract

This article revisits the memory of the Finland's 1860s famine ("Great Hunger Years") at its sesquicentennial by connecting the history and development of famine memorials in Finland with the May 2018 initiative of laying memorial wreaths at a selection of those memorials. A starting point for the article is the notion that the remembrance of the Great Hunger Years has been rather quiet; the article discusses the reasons and the relativity of this quietness. First, the history of establishing famine memorials in Finland is reviewed with attention to their different dates of origin and roles. Perceived as a part of remembering the famine at large, the memorials are reflected against the repeated, national narratives about the hunger years. The article suggests that when taken as a whole, the abundance of local memorials can offer a different reading to the quietness of the memory of the famine tragedy.

The latter part of the article focuses on the possibilities of interpreting this quiet remembrance with attention to the (im)materialities of famine heritage. Connecting the seeming quietness with a notion of multigenerational, traumatic experience, the article discusses the meaning of the quintessential material heritage, that is, the mass graves, at which memorials often stand, in processing the partially absent experiences of loss from the past. The article illustrates the research-led craft initiative of laying memorial wreaths and explicates the intentions of the initiative as a performative art practice. Providing new knowledge about the famine memorials' history the article argues that approaches of aesthetic and

historical experience invite onlookers to revisit the history of the Great Hunger Years in ways that embrace the quietness of famine heritage.

Keywords: Great Hunger Years of 1860s, famine memorials, famine mass graves, traumatic experience, historical experience, performative art practice, ‘new materialism’

Introduction

On the morning of Monday 21st May, 2018, a car, with eight hand-made memorial wreaths packed in to the boot, headed south from Jyväskylä, in Central Finland, to the town of Lahti. There, two researchers met up and started a two-day tour, eventually driving over 1,300 kilometres through the Finnish countryside, to lay commemorative wreaths at eight memorials to Finland’s “Great Hunger Years” [*Suuret Nälkävuodet*] of 1860s.¹ The date was chosen specifically to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the “end” of those famine years, and the tour followed a route from Päijänne Tavastia province (Lahti), to North Karelia (Nurmes), with six intermediate stops in Central Finland (Jämsä, Kivijärvi), Central Ostrobothnia (Perho) and North Savonia (Lapinlahti, Varpaisjärvi, Nilsjä). The memorial wreaths were constructed from materials that evoked the lack of food – and particularly the surrogates consumed – in the 1860s: straw, lichens and pine phloem. As well as covering different Finnish regions, the researchers’ itinerary reflected the different temporal origins and styles of famine memorials, and comprised a representative selection of the almost one hundred sites that have now been identified across Finland (Newby 2017a; Newby 2018a; Newby 2018b).

The memorial wreath initiative was intimately connected to questions around the understated remembrance of the 1860s Hunger Years in Finland. This hunger crisis has recently been described as “Europe’s second-to-last major peacetime subsistence crisis”, and so it sometimes seems dissonant that the famine is so little discussed or remembered

¹ <https://elizakraatari.com/2018/07/14/1860-muistoseppeleet-osa1/>
<https://elizakraatari.com/2018/07/14/1860-muistoseppeleet-osa2/>
<https://elizakraatari.com/2018/07/01/1860s-wreaths-part1/>
<https://elizakraatari.com/2018/07/01/1860s-wreaths-part2/>

either inside or outside of Finland (Ó Gráda 2015, 107). How is this quiet memory to be understood? To what extent is it actually “quiet”, as the large number of local memorials suggests a much stronger culture of remembrance on the sub-national level? Does this, in turn, hint at a divergence between the national historical “master-narrative” and commemoration in areas that suffered the highest mortality during those famine years?

Quiet remembrance is perceived here as the tension between a *need* to remember and a simultaneous *reluctance* to remember, or to give voice to memories. This rather contradictory approach to remembrance was termed by F. R. Ankersmit (2005, 322) as “historical amnesia”. Ankersmit took as his example the Holocaust during World War II, the memory of which was so painful that it was “forgotten” from German public and scholarly discussions for two decades after the war. “The result”, Ankersmit maintained, “was repression and the curious paradox that traumatic experience is both forgotten and remembered.” The experience is too painful to address in words, yet the handicap of speechlessness is how the experience lingers in memory.

The notion of psychological trauma is generally understood as an emotional injury, a response to experiencing a threatening event, and it is manifested in different ways. Quietness as repression, a form of dissociative behaviour, is connected with traumatic experiences, as also Ankersmit’s example pointed out. Many experiences dating to the 1860s famine were of the type likely to traumatize: physical pains due to hunger, torpor and sickness; experiences of emergency, shame and grief; frustration and disappointment with the actions of local or national authorities; facing and dealing with death, the loss of family members, friends and neighbours; and, seeing, handling and interring corpses. These kinds of events were faced by the individual casualties, and endured by the ones that lived through and witnessed the troubled times. Emotional wounds were dealt with (or not) after the catastrophe, and it is conceivable therefore that these traumatic experiences have been transferred to later generations (Häkkinen 1991a; Wiechelt & Gryczynski 2012, 192-194; Siltala 2017). It is therefore relevant to ask

whether there is a connection between the traumatic experiences of the 1860s hunger catastrophe and the quietness in commemorating this period in Finland, or whether the quietness can be interpreted in different ways. Then again, when words are few, we pay more attention to the material forms of the famine memory and related death heritage. We ponder how to deal with the “quiet” memory of the mass deaths of the 1860s, and how to understand the stones that commemorate the mass graves.

This article revisits the memory of the Finnish famine tragedy of 1860s during its sesquicentennial commemorative period. While contextualising the memorial wreath initiative, we use contemporary and historical newspaper and periodical reports, and a small sample from the oral history collections of the Finnish Literature Society. The first part of the article concentrates on the emergence of memorials in the 20th and early 21st centuries, and the role they played in commemorating the loss of up to 200,000 people.² The latter part focuses on the quietness of the troubled memory of hunger and related mass death with special attention to the fluctuating relationship between the materiality and the immateriality of mass graves and death heritage. The aspect of “new materialism” that embraces performative and art practices (Barrett 2013) is applied in the memorial wreath initiative in order to better understand the epistemic and aesthetic meanings and the supra-lingual interaction between the memorials and the wreaths. Along with providing new knowledge about the famine memorials’ history, the article suggests that specifically the aesthetic and historical experiences, as termed by Barrett (2013) and Ankersmit (2005), offer an approach that allows the recognition and acknowledgment of the painful memory of the Great Hunger Years beyond language.

² See Voutilainen 2016, 172–3, for the inherent difficulties of calculating famine mortality in 1860s Finland.

1. Memorials and the “Quiet Remembering” of the 1860s Great Hunger Years

In the bleak twilight of that stern hunger winter, workmates carried Jaakko to the belfry downstairs to await burial. In the following weeks, many of Jaakko's mates were to follow him into the frozen churchyard ground, but death had lost its actual meaning in the minds of the living. Death was not feared, neither when its pitiless grimace was faced by oneself, nor when it gripped one's acquaintances. Life was grim and hopeless. The constantly gnawing hunger numbed all tender feelings – death was the only liberator from the endless state of misery, and so it was not feared. I dedicate these few lines as some kind of memorial to this hunger winter's victim, whose resting place on the Jängänharju cemetery has not ever been marked even by a humble wooden cross. (Laajala 1932, transl. EK).

This recollection is an example of quietness that seems to surround the memory of the Great Hunger Years: there was not even a wooden cross on the grave, and only the few written lines – describing (supposed) reactions to death and the experience of hunger – would serve as a memorial. Still, while the original graves remain unmarked, a memorial stone does stand on the Jängänharju cemetery, a natural boulder that even seems to date to the late 1860s with the crudely engraved year number (“1869”) on it. And even though the written lines summarising local experiences or memories from here and there may have been few and the famine memorials often are of rather modest construction, it was considered as important to mark down the few lines as to erect local memorials.

The quietness of famine remembrance is relative. It has been argued only recently (Newby 2017a, Newby 2018a) that remembrance of the 1860s famine in Finland is quintessentially a local phenomenon, but that the strong local identification with the Great Hunger Years, when taken collectively, can contribute to a somewhat revised view of how the catastrophe is remembered. This ongoing research has accounted for nearly one hundred memorials dedicated to the memory of the hunger tragedy at their respective locations. Nevertheless, in comparison to how, for example, the Irish famine of 1845–51 has been remembered – especially since its sesquicentenary commemorations in 1997 – with monumental sculptures and several other memorials

(including many outside of Ireland, in the context of emigrant communities), many of the Finnish memorials appear rather diminutive; and national actions to commemorate the tragedy are altogether absent in Finland (Mark-Fitzgerald 2013).

A century-and-a-half has now passed since the nadir of the 1860s famine (April–May 1868). Eyewitnesses have long since passed away, but questions still remain about remembering the famine, about the consequences of hunger years’ likely traumatising experiences, and the ways in which the losses and distressing memories have been processed. We are left with the intangible heritage of oral history and folklore, and, possibly, with spiritual imprints that have been, or, continue to be termed as parts of the Finnish mentality and culture (Häkkinen 1991a, 250–251; Kraatari 2016, 184, *passim*). Still, the memory of 1860s famine is tightly entangled with materiality, of which memorials are apparent examples.³ They stand as silent reminders that retain the memory of hunger years: the sense of emergency, the misery, the pain, the frailty and ultimately the death and the mass burials.

Efforts to remember those who died during the 1860s famine began immediately, with stones marked by simple engravings (often just a year – “1867” or similar). It appears that this was a common phenomenon, because those stones are similar in form, although they are found in different parts of country.⁴ They are relatively crude, almost anonymous, and it is easy to imagine that there could be more similar memorials around Finland which have fallen out of memory, or been covered by moss.⁵ It seems that this practice continued an earlier tradition.⁶

³ Other material remains would include, for example, the old grain stores that still stand in or near many local museum yards, tools that were used in processing pine phloem and samples of emergency bread, or the remains of craft items made in exchange for emergency aid.

⁴ Some of the stones which appear to be contemporary are a little more ornate. For example, Parkano’s memorial incorporates a cross, and the stone at Oitti (Hausjärvi), is much more akin to a traditional gravestone, noting the presence of dead railway construction workers. The Tokerotie road-builders’ monument at Taivalmaa was re-consecrated in 1967. Other simple stones, such as at Perho, Hikiä (Hausjärvi), or Liperi, have been supplemented by later enhancements (usually plaques).

⁵ Other sites with such stones include Kulmoinen, Hamina (Salmi), Evijärvi (Väinöntalo), Kangasniemi (Joutsanmaantie) and Kuusankoski.

⁶ For example, the stone discovered in 1969 at Juntulankylä, on the western shore of Pielinen, marks an earlier “Year of Dearth” in 1835). *Vaarojen Sanomat*, 5 Nov. 1969.



Picture 1. In commemoration of the death and burial of famine victims in Perho, it was commented that their “resting place on the Jängänharju cemetery has not ever been marked even by a humble wooden cross”. Nevertheless, the memorial stone at Perho churchyard (Jängänharju) seems to be a contemporary one from the 1860s with a cross symbol and “1869” engraved on it. The small plaque at the site reads: “Memorial stone for those who died in 1860s hunger years.” The memorial wreath was laid at the stone on 21 May 2018. Photo: Eliza Kraatari, 2018.

For the two or three decades after the Great Hunger Years, memorialisation was not set in stone, but rather in words or (less often) pictures (Newby 2018a). Early written recollections focussed largely on the mortality crisis of 1868, and in emphasising the role of early frosts in September 1867 implied strongly that Finland’s devolved administration in Helsinki were helpless in the face of a natural disaster – the subtext was that the Finnish people learned that self-sufficiency, thrift and hard-work were needed to develop as a nation (Svedberg 1871; *Uusi Suometar*, 25 Sep. 1871; Forsberg 2018). In addition to the debates over causes and consequences of the crisis, there is also evidence by the 1890s that Finns were conscious of preserving the “material culture” of the Great Hunger Years (Meurman 1892, 44, 78; Forsberg 2011; Newby 2014, 392–3; Newby & Myllyntaus 2015,

157–8). This could be seen either as a lesson for future generations, or an act of respect for the nameless dead who had been interred in anonymous mass graves (Newby 2017, 176–8).

In the first decade of the 1900s, a famine memorial was erected at Hämeenkyrö, an indication that some communities would not permit popular memory of the 1860s to fade easily. The location is important, as Hämeenkyrö (and other nearby parishes such as Parkano and Suodenniemi) suffered disproportionately high mortality, and it prefigured a pattern that developed in the twentieth century of memorials tending to map on to the areas that were hit hardest by the disease and hunger of the 1860s (Häkkinen & Forsberg 2015, 110; Newby 2017a, 179). Writing in 1914, Eero Koskimies⁷ made an explicit link between this memorial and the prompting of family and community memory:

In the oldest part of Hämeenkyrö's current expanded graveyard, stands... a modest stone memorial, on which is inscribed the following: "Years of Dearth 1867-1868. Grave of the Hundreds of Dead. Lord You Kill, But You Restore Life". On a summer Sunday afternoon... many a solitary traveller pauses at this rock and reads the aforementioned familiar words. Quietly he sighs, and as he takes his leave he sends his heart's wordless greetings to his father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, or to some other close relation, that sleeps beneath this mound. At that time of Death's reaping upon our locale, the hand of the Lord took a relative from everybody. And the ghastly memories of the "Poor Years" never leave the minds of the older generation (Koskimies 1914, transl. AGN).

With this "older generation" and their "ghastly memories" gradually passing, it became important to preserve the memory of other 1860s burial sites, the places of "quiet sighs" and "wordless greetings". Mass graves along the Riihimäki–St. Petersburg Railway seemed to be a particular focus for concern. In Lahti, in 1910, it was reported that the mass grave of railway workers – containing up to eight hundred corpses which could not

⁷ Koskimies as an acquaintance of the Nobel laureate F.E. Sillanpää, who located events of his novel *Hurskas Kujuuus* (*Meek Heritage*) around Hämeenkyrö.

be accommodated in the local cemetery at Hollola - was returning to a state of wilderness. It had “no sign of any kind, and no fence to separate the place where such a large number of the victims of these Years of Death [*surmavuodet*] lie”. The local youths, it was claimed, used the place for leisure, play and “other purposes that are not suitable for a cemetery”, and the author concluded by saying that this state of affairs was unacceptable (“l-r-o” 1910).

Thirty kilometres southwest, in Kärkölä, a similar situation had arisen, as “Rautatieläinen” noted in an impassioned letter to the *Suomalainen* newspaper in 1913. There, the anonymous mass grave had “not a single memorial”, and nothing to differentiate it from its immediate surroundings. A cemetery, “Rautatieläinen” argued, should be a place for quiet reflection and contemplation of one’s ancestors, and as an act of “compassion and gratitude” to those lying beneath the ground, the current

generation had a “sacred duty” to care for the site (“Rautatieläinen” 1913).



Picture 2. Railway builders’ graveyard [*Radanrakentajien hautausmaa*] in Lahti. Initial concerns about disrespect and ignorance of the area were expressed in the 1910s, but the demands for a memorial were finally realised only in 1954. The entire burial mound, that in addition to the memorial retains a single contemporary gravestone, is surrounded by an iron fence that is made from railway tracks in the style of Finnish croft fencing. The monument’s main text reads: “During the 1867–1868 Great Hunger Years, were buried in this place railway builders who died of hunger and disease from Hollola parish, the villages of Lahti and Järvenpää, and from other places. Monument erected by Lahti Parish, 1953.” The memorial wreath was placed on 21 May 2018. Photo: Eliza Kraatari, 2018.

While it took some years for memorials actually to be erected at these (or other, similar) sites, these interventions demonstrated the importance of concerned individuals maintaining a thread of memory in a local community. The fiftieth anniversary of the Great Hunger Years prompted a large number of memoirs to be published in local and regional newspapers, many of which were didactic in tone (especially as a “Hunger Year” loomed again in 1917), or which superimposed local details onto a standard national-level narrative (inter alia, *Suometar* 17 Sep. 1914; “H–I” 1916; *Turun Sanomat* 31 Dec. 1916; Suvanne 1917; *Viipurin Sanomat* 23 Dec. 1917). The Finnish Historical Society prepared questionnaires to be distributed around the country, arguably to prevent key information from passing out of existence with the passing of the “famine generation” (*Kotiseutu* 1917, 91–4). It is also clear that an alternative historical interpretation – one which was much more critical of the Helsinki administration and the ineffective relief measures undertaken in the 1860s – was being put forward by socialist commentators (Gylling 1917).

Finland’s independence and subsequent Civil War had three significant implications for the commemoration of the Great Hunger Years: firstly, the White victory crystallised the earlier nationalist view of the 1860s as the hegemonic interpretation – the crisis was a God-given test for the Finnish people; they survived the test and learned valuable lessons about hard-work, thrift and self-dependency. The 1860s could be presented therefore as the inevitable economic birth pains of a new nation, pain that needed to be endured, or as one of several “building blocks” which helped to create a modern state. The alternative (“Red”) narrative, placing blame on the élites – the authorities in Helsinki and the provincial governors – for their slow, ineffective and misjudged response to an obvious and accelerating crisis, was sidelined for several generations.⁸ Secondly, the churchyard war graves (lit. “hero graves” [*sankarihaudat*]) which were created for fallen White soldiers created a space in which memorials could be erected (including, later, for the Winter War, Continuation War, and in memory of e.g. those who were forced to flee

⁸ For example, a Social Democratic perspective (Laakso 1927) published in 1927 seems hesitant to press potentially divisive issues too strongly.

from Ceded Karelia). Famine memorials would often be situated in this context, reinforcing the “building block” theory (Tepora 2014, 178). The third consequence was more prosaic – the simple fact that Finland’s independence was achieved in 1917, and Civil War (often presented as essential in protecting that independence) followed in early 1918, means that semicentennial commemorations for these events will always occur at the same time – and it seems inevitable that, on a national level, the famine years will take a back seat.

As the number of those with lived experience of the 1860s was in decline, the 1920s saw an increased discourse around the famine memorialisation. Memoirs about the tragic events still appeared regularly in local newspapers, but – perhaps inspired also by the events of 1918 – erecting memorials was more discussed. A correspondent in Lehtimäki (South Ostrobothnia) in 1928, noted:

In the current graveyard can be found a particular nook, where there are no grave-markings at all, and the older folks say that in that place are buried the victims of the 1867–68 Hunger Years. We of the current generation, who live in the fields of those victims of the Hunger Years, we have a sacred responsibility to remember those victims, and erect on their mass grave a collective memorial. Therefore I would like to point out that if someone possibly comes to you, looking for funds for this purpose, then do not stint. We cannot really wash away the sufferings of those who experienced such distress during those times, but we can with these donations demonstrate that we have the desire to do our utmost, if there would be an opportunity – and there seems no other way to do it – that we wish to mark their otherwise forgotten burial-place and preserve their memory for another generation (Ähtäri 27 Jul. 1928, transl. AGN).

Although Lehtimäki had to wait until the 1960s for the memorial that would mark the memory of suffering and loss, other local initiatives began to take root in the 1930s. At least three memorials were planned in the mid-1930s, all of them in the vicinity of famine-era mass graves, and two of which were actually completed. The first of these was inaugurated at Könönpelto, near Varkaus (North Savonia, 1936), where 281 people from 51 different parishes had died in 1868 during the construction of the Taipale Canal

- a major relief work site (*Länsi-Savo*, 17 Sep. 1936; *Nuori Kanssa*, 22 Oct. 1936; *Rakennustaito*, 13 May 1938). It was also at this time that advanced plans were presented for a memorial at Kirkkopuisto in Lieksa (North Karelia). It was recorded that 1,500 victims of hunger were buried at the site, without coffins and laid several bodies deep, and the renowned artist Antti Salmenlinna had designed a cuboid stone memorial, commemorating “those who perished from starvation”. It does not seem, however, that these plans were ever realised.⁹ The large commemorative cross at Sotkamo’s main churchyard (Kainuu, 1938), recalled the “forgotten dead” of the “Great Hunger- and Disease-Years of 1867–68”, and the extent of the mortality – almost one quarter of the 6,000 parishioners died – was highlighted at the inauguration ceremony (Tervo 2013).

The preservation of memories of the 1860s, as crystallised in memorials, gathered new impetus after World War II. New memorials were erected e.g. at Piippola (North Ostrobothnia, 1946) Alajärvi (South Ostrobothnia, 1951), Koiraharju-Varpaisjärvi (North Savonia, 1950s), Lahti, (Päijänne Tavastia, 1954), Veteli (Central Ostrobothnia, 1954), Kiuruvesi (North Savonia, 1955), and Hämeenlinna (Tavastia Proper, 1958). It seems likely, though, that by this time, more recent national traumas affected the general commemorative culture in Finland. It was argued by Pajari (Kaitasuo 2015) that World War II marked a “clear watershed” in Finnish death culture and that the increased interest in monuments represented a “continuation of the nation-builders” worldview. The positioning of famine memorials in the 1940s and 1950s may have coincided with the establishing of monuments to the victims of Winter War and Continuation War, but together they can also have appeared to fit the “building block” approach to national history suggested earlier. Interpreting famine casualties as a “sacrifice” for the fatherland might then have seemed to be a logical line of thought that would focus more attention on the fates of the famine dead, who often had not got a “proper” burial.¹⁰ Therefore, on

⁹ For more about the memorials in Lieksa, see Newby, 2018b.

¹⁰ We would argue that there is a clear and important distinction to be made between the mass graves of 1868 and the mass burials of executed Reds of 1918. Although increased commemoration of famine mass graves coincided with war memorials, this does not imply that interring of famine victims’ corpses would have been disrespectful or hostile, as was often the case during Civil War mass burials.

the one hand, the “ghastly memories” and the experiences of those who “suffered the distressed times of 1860s famine” can have been considered to fit the master-narrative of nation building (and thus in part caused people to overlook the original tragedy and its heritage) while, on the other hand, the increased interest in memorials more generally paved the way for acknowledging those memories and experiences on the local level. For example, concerning the “Railway Constructors’ Graveyard” at Lahti, there were already in 1910s sporadic concerns that this mass burial site was not sufficiently recognised. It was another four decades before a fundraising and awareness initiative succeeded and in 1954 a formal memorial was inaugurated at the site (see picture 2).¹¹

2. Famine Memorials as Material Testimonies to the Mass Graves

The letters and articles suggesting (or demanding) the establishment of memorials demonstrate a need to maintain and respect the memory of the Great Hunger Years, and indeed, the famine memorials are material reminders of past events and losses. They can also function as practical signposts of lawfully protected areas: famine mass graves dating back over 100 years and located beyond church graveyards, including, of course, also those from before the 1860s, are recognised a subcategory of religious antiquities and are protected under the Antiquities Act (Niukkanen 2009, 8; 79–80; Antiquities Act 295/1963 § 2). With the increasing number of memorials in the 1950s and 1960s, it also became more common that they indicated the number of deceased either in the respective parish or the amount of bodies in the mass grave.

At the evocative memorial site at Koiraharju, Varpaisjärvi, memorial stones bear both functions. Here, a small forest area encloses a mass-grave that was created out of expediency when the severe weather prevented the transportation of dead bodies to their intended burial place at Nilsä, over 40 km distant. It also exemplifies how memories are transmitted over time at a particular site. Wooden crosses were originally in place, but

¹¹ Although the memorial stone is dated 1953, the inauguration ceremony seems to have taken place in the summer of 1954. See *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat*, 21 Dec. 1950, 26 Jun. 1954.

these were replaced in 1951 by a small, engraved stone, marking the eventually permanent burial of approximately 60 people.¹² In 1981, the local Lions Club arranged for this to be augmented by a gravestone (*Matti ja Liisa* 2015). Most recently, in 2012, this stone was itself supplemented (not replaced) by a new, larger memorial, with a slightly extended text.



Picture 3. Koiraharju cemetery, Korpijärvi village, Varpaisjärvi, was only meant to serve as a temporary burial area, but the bodies were never removed. The area holds two granite memorials that replaced the original wooden crosses and grave planks. The Biblical reference on both memorials is to Exodus 3:5: “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” The memorial wreath was laid at Koiraharju on 22 May 2018. Photo: Eliza Kraatari, 2018.

The 1960s marked the centenary of the Great Hunger Years and prompted an increase in memorialisation.¹³ These memorials were sometimes more ornate than the ones that

¹² Aside the wooden crosses that were removed, two wooden plaques bearing the names of the dead were relocated to museums in the 1950s.

¹³ Of the memorials recorded (Newby 2018b) approximately one-fifth were established in the 1960s.

had gone before, often invested with symbolism, and situated not only by famine-era mass graves, but near the “Hero Graves” of Civil War and World War II dead. The famine memorial at Nurmes (North Karelia), inaugurated in 1965, is notable for several reasons. It is the first memorial to be a named work of art – *Maaemon Syli* (“In the Lap of Mother Earth”), a relief by the sculptor Veikko Jalava (who also created the famine memorial at Heinävesi).¹⁴ In the accompanying book, *Maaemon Syli*, it was reiterated that the parishes of Nurmes and Valtimo lost 1,218 inhabitants in 1868, buried in unmarked mass graves, and that Jalava’s sculpture honoured “these victims’ difficult battle for their daily bread”. An additional aim of this book was to connect those who died “to the members of the same families one hundred years later”, something that was achieved by naming all of the local famine dead, including date and cause of death (Juustila 1965, 6–7).

As with Nurmes, the memorial at Jämsä (1987) is an innovative piece of art, in a conventional setting. It is invested with symbolism (a granite monument divided into three pieces, which not only resembles a stone rendering of the emergency bread eaten during the hunger years, it is explicitly designed to represent the “broken life cycle” caused by the famine), but is situated in the vicinity of the mass graves at the southern portion of the churchyard. Here, the concept of the Great Hunger Years forming a part of the Finns’ long national struggle is emphasised again by the proximity of the war graves and the quotation from P. E. Svinhufud (President of Finland, 1931–7) on the explanatory panel: “our people’s entire past is a guarantee of the future”. The panel also tells that the provost blessed 86 victims in May 1868 alone – and overall some 1,082 Jämsä inhabitants died in 1868.

This inclusion on many of the memorials of mortality figures provides important context, and can differentiate the local from the national story – highlighting that an area suffered particularly badly in the 1860s. Demographic analyses have pinned down the most

¹⁴ Subsequently, the memorials at Kiihtelysvaara (North Karelia, 1974), Juuka (North Karelia, 1980), Mäntsälä (Uusimaa, 1983), and Tohmajärvi (North Karelia, 1994), were all specially commissioned sculptures by well-known artists.

apparent consequences of the “death years” that were summarised in Pitkänen’s (1993, 116) research results: “During the famine years of 1866–68, short-term population losses (including the deficit in births) reduced the pre-famine population of 1.8 million individuals by about nine per cent.” National population loss illustrates the proportions of the tragedy, but death rate calculations also contribute to how famine history is perceived, both nationally and locally. The number of dead on memorials can appear as statistical observations that serve to compare the “local number” of casualties with the “total number” of mortality. While this information is by all means relevant, it can follow from the dichotomy between the full sum and its parts that each of the local hunger histories appear as a numeric “single case” or as a “local example”, a perspective that can blur the vision from seeing the inexhaustible sum of crises experienced on the local or, indeed, on a smaller (e.g. communal, familial, individual) scale.



Picture 4. Moss covers black granite of the famine memorial in Jämsä that symbolises the broken life cycle. The memorial wreath was laid at the memorial on 21 May 2018. Photo: Eliza Kraatari, 2018.

Many famine memorials, however, omit details of local mortality. One of the most recent memorials, a polished granite stone by the Kortesjärvi church, unveiled in November 2017, refers neither to a number of dead, nor to location(s) of mass grave(s), not even to specific years, but is simply dedicated “To the memory of those who died of hunger” (Nahkala, 2017). Still, Kortesjärvi, and also the municipalities where the two other memorials were unveiled during the sesquicentenary of the worst famine years, 2017–18, counted among the “disaster municipalities”, a listing collected by Turpeinen (1986, 105) of municipalities that saw over one-seventh of the populations perish during the Great Hunger Years.¹⁵

A few other memorials have been established in the 21st century and with the “sesquicentennial” period in 2017–18 the issue of commemoration resurfaced. However, it did not seem likely at any stage that the 150th anniversary of the Great Hunger Years would prompt the same enthusiastic level of memorialisation seen in Ireland in 1997 (referred by Cormac Ó Gráda (2001a) as “famine fever”). It is quite apparent that the commemoration of 1860s famine is still most likely to take place locally, which also would appear as a rather natural outcome. Obviously, the tragedy of the Great Hunger Years was nationally outstanding, but it was experienced quintessentially at local levels. Ó Gráda’s critical viewpoints about the “collective memory” of famine in Ireland are important, because they underline the profound inequality that famine tragedies involve, “a hierarchy of suffering” (Ó Gráda 2001b, 123).

Similarly, the Great Hunger Years caused various and always personal experiences of suffering, and although for many, by no means for all. Furthermore, even the same events may have provoked different experiences. For example, whereas facing death may have been a mere relief for one, witnessing dying may have been an extreme if not a traumatic experience for another. Indeed, while death was in the centre of the tragedy,

¹⁵ These are at: Kortesjärvi (South Ostrobothnia, unveiled Nov 2017, the ninth worst hit municipality); Suodenniemi (Pirkanmaa, unveiled 26 Aug 2018, eleventh on the list), and Ruovesi (Pirkanmaa, 26 Aug 2018, twelfth on the list). A fourth new memorial – a plaque on the perimeter wall of Kiikoinen Church – was inaugurated in December 2018. The wall was built as relief work in 1868, and the proximity of the parish to Lavia, Suodenniemi and Mouhijärvi locates it firmly in one of the “disaster” areas (Newby 2018b).

it is important to grasp that death, as is pointed out by Frihammar and Silverman (2018, 6), “oscillates between the material and the intangible dimensions of existence”. The following eyewitness story from Pihitipudas might illustrate the fine lines between those dimensions:

I was twelve years old when I followed granddad to watch the burial at Pihitipudas cemetery. That was a sight that the young [younger generations] haven't seen. In the long, shared grave there were 64 dead waiting for funeral service. Four were in coffins, another 60 had been brought without a coffin, they were put in the grave between long wood shingles, their hair and feet bare and visible. Provost Dahlström first said “Oh! Oh!” when he came to read the service. The crying and moaning were so loud we had to wait before the ceremony could begin. While waiting there, one [of the bodies] without a coffin lifted his/her leg upwards from between the shingles and they went to help him/her sit in the grave, but s/he sank back. About for an hour we waited, whether s/he or others still moved and then priest started to read and bless the grave. Some seventy years back, when people died and they collected and took them to a joint grave, there have been ones who were taken during their dying, as was the one that still moved its leg in the bottom of the grave. (Kokkonen 1937, transl. EK).

Cemeteries are quintessentially “landscapes of death” (Frihammar & Silverman 2018, 8), but also special places where life and death connect and where this relationship is organized not only on individual- and familial-, but also communal and national levels. The special status of cemeteries is apparent through the religious aspect, the act of consecrating land that sublimates the burial of individual, extinguished lives. The notion of mass grave, on the contrary, challenges this particularity and underlines the collectiveness and the multiplicity of death that has taken place. Indeed, mass graves replace individuality by anonymity. Left unmarked, it follows that as “landscapes of death” these places can easily turn into “a no man’s land of death”. In this sense, the bones and the places where they are laid matter and they are, indeed, matter of fact. But as the bizarre materiality of dead bodies of 1860s famine victims has transformed into absence, the different kinds of memorial stones serve as proof of this invisible heritage.



Picture 5. As at many other sites in Finland, the Lapinlahti famine memorial is situated next to war graves. The memorial wreath visit took place on 22 May 2018. Photo: Eliza Kraatari, 2018.

3. The Absence and Presence of the Painful Experiences of the Famine

A recent archaeological study of a famine burial site in Ireland illustrates the parallel anonymity of famine death, individuality of suffering and the materiality of mass graves. A famine mass burial dating to the Great Famine (1845–52) was uncovered in Kilkenny in 2005, when human skeletal remains were found during construction work.¹⁶ The discovery was recognised a mass grave belonging to the former Kilkenny Union Workhouse and it held the remnants of nearly one thousand bodies. (Geber 2015, 1–2.) The remains of the casualties were analysed through archaeological methods as the

¹⁶ A similar incident occurred in Finland, outside Kappelinmäki Churchyard (Vaasa / Korsholm), in the 1950s. The 1860s mass grave had been long forgotten, until workers shifting earth for a nearby road project uncovered numerous human remains. The site was re-covered, and forgotten again for several decades. A memorial was erected in 2008 (Newby, 2018b).

“physical testimony of the living individual they once belonged to” (ibid., 15). The skeletal remnants were scrutinised for imprints of possible diseases, malnutrition and injuries on bones, teeth, ligaments, even the cause of death, which sometimes could be discerned from skeletal tissue. Whereas the mass graves are evidence of death, the analysis of human body remains served as evidence of the life of the famine victims:

The individuals buried anonymously in the Kilkenny mass burial pits lived a life full of hardship. Their struggle for existence culminated in the Great Famine, during which they ultimately perished. These individuals made the desperate decision to seek help from a despised and much feared institution [union workhouse]. This notion provides an indirect insight into the physical suffering these people must have sustained. (Geber 2015, 196.)

Another aspect to the mass graves is that of the survivors and those who tried to manage the crisis, something partially illustrated in this article by the fragments of oral / folklore evidence. The creation of a mass grave was a conscious act of organising death, in practice, a concrete act of manually excavating the pits, handling the corpses and coffins that added to the sum of traumatic experiences: “These actions were therefore part of an experienced reality that continued long after the famine had come to an end. The trauma of the famine is evident in the folklore of the period, and it may even have been archaeologically manifested in the Kilkenny workhouse mass burial ground.” (Geber 2015, 15.)

Again, famine trauma did not apply evenly to the whole population. In relation to Ireland Ó Gráda (2001b, 121) pointed out that the disaster “struck the poor more than the rich and pitted neighbour against neighbour”, which made the crisis “hardly promising material for a communal, collective memory”. In the Finnish case, despite the class and geographical discrepancies in mortality, almost all of the universal facets of famine which might suggest “weakness of character” – especially increases in crime or opportunism – were subsumed beneath a narrative which highlighted the supposed national virtues of sedulity, honesty and stoicism. These lines of interpretation were present in Agathon

Meurman's "classic" review of the famine that also stated that outcomes of the catastrophe were the "generally refreshed spirit" and the eagerness for progress and improvement of Finland's national economy (Meurman 1892, 65).¹⁷ The quietness and calmness of famine victims was also politicised, underlining that the calmness proved people's obedience and decency, of the willingness rather to die than to succumb to thievery or to riot and challenge government: "Finland's people were able to die, but they were not able to seek salvation in crime" (ibid., 60; see Häkkinen 1991b, 194; Newby 2017b, 188).

Still, many recollections and contemporary documentations rather seem to describe the psychological shelter of silence, as dissociation from the shattering circumstances. Even Meurman, although disseminating viewpoints that were ignorant of the traumatising impact of the event, nevertheless agreed on the need for dissociative behaviour. Quoting district doctor Karl Edvard von Bonsdorff, (1829–94) he assured readers that he had witnessed the same with his own eyes:

But even when the cause of death was not typhoid, but general languishing, it was still said to be disease, usually the "sickness on foot", that is, where the patient could keep on their feet until death came. This hiding veil covering the horrors and anguish was nevertheless a needed alleviation both for the distressed and the witnesses in order to tolerate the difficulties of the situation. All this misery was only tolerable, because the excessive suffering dulled and hardened its witness, as nothing in human power was of effective help against it. What then was suffered, no pen will write down and describe, because the people did not want its agonies exposed. It suffered in complete silence. (K. E. von Bonsdorff in Meurman 1892, 62; transl. EK).

¹⁷ Virrankoski challenged this Phoenix-like narrative in his survey of Finnish history. He argues that the "Finnish War" of 1808–09 had also been demographically catastrophic for Finland, and yet inspired no economic boom (Virrankoski 2001, 527).

Pictures 6 and 7. The famine memorial in Nilsjä was established at the centenary in 1968. The memorial wreath here was embellished with a composition of “praying forks” in recognition of Paavo Ruotsalainen (1777–1852), who lived in Nilsjä and was a leading character of the religious Awakening movement. The wreath was laid at the memorial on 22 May 2018. Photo: Eliza Kraatari, 2018.



Indeed, Häkkinen has pointed out about the famine experience that “the traumatic experience seems to have transformed into a myth, a matter that has been only approachable through oral history and prose”, adding that “the fate of famine victims has not been officially or nationally acknowledged nor their honour ever restored”

(Häkkinen 1991a, 251). Yet, this is what many of the local memorials were aimed at, as the 1928 memorial campaigner had phrased: the injuries of the famine were irreparable but the “sacred duty” was to mark the mass-graves and preserve the memories of the famine (*Ähtäri*, 27 Jul. 1928). While the mass graves that hold the remnants of interred victims once created the cruel, material evidence of the famine, it is apparent that the memorial stones not only stand as testimonies to mass death but the experience at large.

The notion of traumatic experience is an important key to understanding the memory and heritage of the Great Hunger Years, a key that, it seems, would open the way to a research area less explored and that by no means is likely to be easy terrain. This is especially so when traumatic experience is paired with trauma transmission through generations and with individual and collective levels. Still, addressing the topic would as such not be exceptional, as it appears that “the multigenerational experience of trauma across groups that experienced mass trauma is a universal phenomenon” (Wiechelt & Gryczynski 2012, 198). Discussing the cultural and historical trauma of Native Americans Wiechelt & Gryczynski also pointed out that the troubled experiences and memories often are further complicated with issues of power hierarchies and political aspects. Therefore, while a step towards healing would be the recognition of traumatisation, even this can be hindered, for example, through power distribution among “social institutions in the domains of religion, law, science, aesthetics, mass media, and state bureaucracy” that can affect how “trauma is or is not represented in a culture” (ibid., 197).

Theorising on historical experience, Ankersmit connected the notion of psychological trauma to writing history with special attention to forgetfulness (Ankersmit 2005, 322): the human mind can shelter itself from a shattering experience through amnesia, but a comparable phenomenon can happen at a historiographical level as an amnesia-like silence, a reluctance to discuss certain historical events. To be precise, however, psychological amnesia is essentially a matter of individual psyche while historiographical silence is rather an interplay of repressive reacting, selective remembering and

incapability of making distinctions (Hollander 2011). In order to research potentially traumatic history, acknowledging the pain would be a starting point of research, which, according to Ankersmit, would also take place in silence. This quietness is found in the historian's (sublime) historical experience, an approach to the past that is "closer to moods and feelings than to knowledge" and often beyond language (Ankersmit 2005, 225). This implies that, for the one unravelling the past, it is easily at hand in historical experience where the propensity to such sensations is a direct way to relate to the past experiences: "moods and feelings are, in the most literal sense of the word, *next to nothing* - and, thus, in terms of them, 'next to nothing' will prevent us from moving through the temporal and existential space ordinarily separating the past from the present" (ibid., 308-9). This notion of historical experience was further exemplified with historical objects, in which the past is present so that "they have this capacity to provoke a historical experience in those who are singularly sensitive to the complex meanings of those signs" (ibid., 115).



Picture 8. The famine memorial at Kivijärvi stands by Road 58. Located next to the modern concrete bridge at Hannonsalmi, the memorial is constructed from the original bridge stones used in the bridges built as relief work in 1860s and later (see footnote 27). The memorial wreath was laid at Kivijärvi on 21 May 2018. Photo: Eliza Kraatari, 2018.

Finnish famine memorials stand as testimonies to famine mass graves and reminders of the experience at large, but they can also work as objects that provoke experiences through which the past is grasped beyond language and that in this way can add to historical consciousness. Considering that majority of famine memorials precede academic research about 1860s famine history, that remained very modest until the 1980s and 1990s (Voutilainen 2016, 18–19), the numerous local famine memorials can, indeed, be recognised as popular interventions and initiatives to commemorate the events. Memorials may even be seen as materialisations of intergenerational trauma transmission that reflect the local history against the national narrative while keeping the memory confined to the local community and remaining “quiet”. Indeed, the boulders dedicated to work as famine memorials appear to reflect the awareness of the significance of the memory, sometimes in sheer size. It is as if the memorials would call the onlooker to perceive the weight of the traumatic experience: “look at our stones, look how heavy they are.”¹⁸

4. Wreaths Meet Memorials - Performative Act and Material Interaction at Death Heritage

On a national scale, commemoration of the Great Hunger Years has been subdued throughout 2017–18, despite the anniversary context, but this very reticence also prompted some attention. An editorial in the influential daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* (16 Jul. 2017) pondered why the 1860s famine was a “catastrophe that Finns do not remember”¹⁹, which was, in turn, picked up by other newspapers featuring a few articles on local memorials, as well as more general stories about local experiences of the 1860s (Mörttinen 2017; Perttula 2017). As researchers who had concentrated on this

¹⁸ For example, a correspondent called “Johannes” described in 1929 the bridges from which the Kivijärvi memorial (see picture 8) was later constructed. These bridges were built as a local relief project in the 1860s, and “Johannes” wrote that: “A particularly special impression is made by the imposing stone bridges of Hannonsalmi and Matalasalmi, that carry the road over a few beautiful inlets of Kivijärvi. There hardly exists more beautiful scenery than that which opens up from these bridges. And in my view, the bridges themselves represent robust beauty – they are manly memorials to their builders.” (“Johannes” 1929. Transl. AGN).

¹⁹ See also Seppälä 2017.

chapter of Finnish history, we discussed the role of the researcher at a time when commemorative activity might seem natural – especially having lived through the equivalent Irish commemorations in 1996–7 (AGN). Would it be enough to observe and analyse commemorative activity (or its absence), or would the sesquicentennial also offer the researcher the chance to contemplate and reflect on the famine heritage on a more personal level?

The preliminary idea for laying wreaths at famine memorials was in part inspired by Ankersmit’s notion of (sublime) historical experience. This, again, is in part captured in Ihanus’ claim that “those interred in mass burials remain magically alive until the living have acknowledged their destinies and allowed them a place filled with expiation and empathy in the livings’ own existence” (2012, 152, transl. EK). Furthermore, reacting to the “quiet” remembrance of the famine through the “quietness” of laying memorial wreaths appeared as an appropriate choice, and indeed, through this initiative we positioned ourselves, partly privately, partly publicly, in processes of historical experience, commemoration and bereavement, and – importantly – took the chance to pay our respects to the casualties and survivors of the harsh events that had been the focus of our research.

The memorial wreath initiative was quintessentially a personal act: there was no external funding or institutional partners involved. The public information about it was narrowed to updates and event news on personal accounts on social media²⁰ and to a press release that was sent out to local newspapers²¹ and congregation representatives²² respective to the memorials’ locations. But even though the initiative was intended as personal and discreet, it was certainly a conscious and intentional act that brought into action our knowledge about famine history, the memorials, their contexts and historical

²⁰ Instagram account @finnishfaminememorials Also accessible via: <https://www.instagram.com/finnishfaminememorials>
Facebook event *1860-luvun nälkävuosien muistoseppeleet - 1860s Memorial Wreaths*:
<https://www.facebook.com/events/102089317337347/>

²¹ The wreaths were also left with a written card to inform memorial visitors of the initiative.

²² All selected memorials are maintained by the local parish.

backgrounds, which then was channelled into the designing and making of the wreaths (EK) and the planning of routes and timetables (AGN).

As the creating of wreaths was an essential part of the initiative, the project was thoroughly entangled with materiality starting from the preparing of wreaths.²³ Furthermore, in the commemoration of the 1860s Great Hunger Years the meanings of materiality, immateriality and, indeed, the lack of material, have strong symbolical and semantic, historically-loaded meanings. In the famine memorials the symbolism of materials is reflected in the use of boulders, millstones²⁴ or railway track, or as depictions of broken rye stems or begging hands. Composing the memorial wreaths, the material choices were selected to remind of the material shortage: straw and lichens are typically used in decorative wreaths, but at the time of famine they, as well as pine phloem that was applied in memorial wreaths in the form of dark “ribbon”, were consumed as food surrogates. In addition, all memorial wreaths were embellished with modified and mostly black-painted cutlery suggesting their lost function in the famine and evoking the mouths that perished.

Yet it is the two-stage memorial wreath initiative at whole – (i) the preparing and making of wreaths; and (ii) the tour when they were laid at the selected memorials – that serves here as a performative act and art practice, a process, in which material, aesthetic, affective and epistemic aspects interlinked and where the lingual gave way to the aesthetic. As such, the initiative adopted perspectives of “new materialism”, especially the approach that Barrett (2013) has conceptualised as the “aesthetic image”. This she sees as a performative and subjective process (instead of an art object of external observation) that can challenge the conventions of knowledge production and instead

²³ In part, materials for wreaths were picked from forests and fields and in part purchased at flea markets and hardware stores. Natural materials included straw; lichens, usnea, mosses; pine twigs, roots and phloem; spruce, birch, aspen and heather twigs; dead leaves, pine and alder cones. In collecting natural materials no living green plants were harmed and materials, such as straw, were collected with landowner’s permission (and kind assistance). The making of the wreaths took place in Kraatari’s *ad hoc* studio (kitchen).

²⁴ Millstones have been used in many famine memorials. Along with examples from Ireland, the primary *Holodomor* memorial in Kyiv, Ukraine, entitled the Bitter Memory of Childhood, features twenty-four millstones (known as the “Millstones of Destiny”) that surround the main statue of a mourning girl.

emphasises the experiential and transformative aspects of knowledge. She suggests that “distanced observation is replaced with aesthetic awareness” with material process in the centre, and continues:

*Experience operates within the domain of the aesthetic; knowledge produced through aesthetic experience is always contextual and situated since it involves direct sensory engagement with objects in the world. Artistic experience therefore, occurs as a continuum with normal processes of living and is derived from an impulse to handle objects and to think and **feel** through their handling. What emerges from this process is the aesthetic image – an image that is heterogeneous in that it permits a **knowing** that exceeds what can be captured by the symbolic. (Barrett 2013, 64 [emphasis as in original text].)*

Barrett’s perspective on aesthetic experience and performative action is intriguingly close to Ankersmit’s notions of historical experience, the perceiving of past events from the historian’s position, and the potentiality of created objects to provoke such experience. Similarly, the performativity of creating wreaths and the two-day tour of laying them, was an act *with* knowledge about the past events and an act *toward* knowledge, to acknowledging the pain and sorrow of the famine experience. It was a process where the knowing subject, the artist (EK), allowed herself be immersed in the materiality of making (including the materiality of the working hands and the composing mind) and the travellers (EK, AGN) visiting the memorials, handling the wreaths, laying them at the memorials, thus letting the epistemological and ontological aspects of the process to amalgamate. Focussing on the material interaction between the memorial stone and the wreath, there can be allegorically seen a “keeper” of memory (the stone) and the “seer” of that memory (the wreath). The “aesthetic image” resulting from this process is available in this article as the collection of documentative photographs taken at each memorial immediately after the laying of the wreath.²⁵

²⁵ The wreaths were documented also before the tour: <https://elizakraatari.com/portfolio/1860s-wreaths/>

While this act was personal and situated, the initiative worked as a subtle way to increase attention to the nexus of local memorials and the mass graves respectively. Through using the concepts of “aesthetic image” and “historical experience” we accept that the experience of those who lived through – or died in – the 1860s is largely beyond the reach of conventional historical knowledge production. This, however, should not lead to the conclusion that those traumatic experiences would be irrelevant, either then or now. Therefore, our initiative is an invitation to revisit the Great Hunger Years’ heritage per aesthetic and historical experiences and thus to participate in the “interrelation between the transmission of historical experience and the rewriting of history” that “yields new recollections of past experiences and thus emphasises the role of rewriting history as a contemporary interpretation of the past to enhance the understanding of our contemporary selves” (Kraatari 2016, 36; see also Johnston & Marwood 2017; Walter 2008).



Pictures 9 and 10. Memorial in Nurmes, a granite sculpture by Veikko Jalava, is entitled *Maaemon syli* (“In the Lap of Mother Earth”). The memorial wreath laid at the Nurmes memorial (22 May 2018) was specially dedicated to the children who perished in the 1860s famine. Photo: Eliza Kraatari, 2018.

5. Conclusion

Remembrance of the 1860s Great Hunger Years remains quiet at the national level 150 years after the tragedy. During this time, however, *local* commemoration of the famine has persisted. An apparent material expression of cherishing the memory is the establishment of memorial stones: the number of memorials increased notably in the 1960s, the centenary of the famine, and has grown consistently since. Positioned often in the immediate vicinity of famine mass graves, and regularly indicating the number of local casualties, the material heritage of the Great Hunger Years is strong despite the ambivalence that is a characteristic of the national “master-narrative” of the famine. In this canonical story, quietness may have been interpreted as dignified or discreet silence, or, in more hierarchical readings, as an indication of the “common people’s” stoicism, meekness and obedience to their superiors. Recognising quiet remembrance as one consequence of the profoundly traumatising consequences of the Great Hunger Years has seldom been discussed. As the major anniversaries of national independence (1917) and the Civil War (1918) coincide with the Great Hunger Years, it also seems that the traumatic experience of famine has been marginalised by the momentous events that took place 50 years later. This, however, does not in itself explain the cultural and historiographical ignorance either of the original trauma or its transmission in subsequent generations.

Research into the sub-national level of commemoration of the Great Hunger Years, based on mapping memorials, demonstrates the extent to which communities retain the famine and the associated mass mortality as a part of their local heritage. As part of an alternative national history, the individual memorials can be seen as pixels which, when viewed together, permit a more detailed review of this history and its legacy, with more focus on ethico-ontological and aesthetic aspects. The memorial wreath initiative introduced in this article serves as an example of a research(er)-led performative art practice that, through the material processes and related aesthetic and historical experiences, acknowledges the painful past and approaches modes of historical

consciousness in ways that exceed boundaries of language. While this performative action is intrinsically personal and situated, the resulting “aesthetic image” is open and invitatory for individuals and communities to revisit and experience the Great Hunger Years’ heritage and to participate in visualising and, finally, voicing this memory.

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