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### **Extended abstract for "Media's Mapping Impulse", Symposium to be held at the Institute of Geography at the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, June 2016**

The article is part of a two-year postdoc project where I examine the relations between contemporary memory culture and popular history regarding the North Africa Campaign during the Second World War, with a focus on the battles at El Alamein in autumn 1942. Inspired by Edward Said I do a contrapuntal reading of Western and Egyptian popular narratives, the first perspective as represented in 20 mainstream tv documentary films shown on global networks such as the History Channel. Here I will be focusing on this part, examining the interplay between different spatialities, from the cartographic to the mythical, and the relations to present-day Western mental mappings of the MENA region. An important concept is what I call *de-historization*, where the Mediterranean is no longer a sea of connection, cultural exchange and co-existence, but a sea imbued with connotations of division and – as has so tragically been established – of death.

The orientalized representation of the opposite shores of the Mediterranean, symbolically removing them from centuries of shared cultural heritage, is characteristic for the majority of the films in the study. The part of the classic British tv documentary series *The World At War* (1973) that deals with the North Africa Campaign begins with a verbal statement that is repeated in several of the later films. To the visual imagery of a barren desert landscape, the commentator states: "This land was made for war. Here is no nubile, girlish land. No green and virginal countryside for war to violate. This land is hard. Inviolable." The symbolical absence of local human life in North Africa during WWII indicates a common narrative within this genre of popular history dominated by an Orientalist perspective where the land of the Other is free for Western man to exploit according to his present needs. The trope of sparsely inhabited lands in remote areas is familiar from traditional colonialist narratives with pure nature waiting for the white man's civilizing and exploiting mission. There are further connotations to the sublime, as in a number of films there are lots of sunsets, sunrises and full moons over the desert. This first comes as quite a surprise, as it is not what one would normally expect from a WWII documentary. As this is a striking feature I suggest a connection to the image of the desert as not only pure nature but also *a liminal zone*, something almost holy. Pilgrims and hermits go to the desert in order to find God, or in a more secular setting to find themselves. Accordingly, the desert is perfect for an epic struggle between life and death, which also makes it symbolically situated outside time, an important aspect of the Orient following Fabian's famous notion of the *denial of coevalness*. Thus, the people living here are not and cannot be 'like us', as they are even temporally Other.

The idea of an entirely empty desert is being promoted in more than half of the films in the study. No local population, and no towns or settlements, and so it was – and 'is' – perfect for 'clean warfare', without risk of civilian casualties or damages to non-military infrastructure. However, the claim that the desert was empty becomes quite paradoxical, as shown by the many maps in the films, filled with nation flags and arrows showing the positions and movements of the opposing armies. They also include names of towns and settlements – Tobruk, Sidi Barrani, Mersa Matruh, El Alamein and Alexandria, among others – and logically these ought to have had inhabitants affected by the war. This, however, is not something that is being mentioned. In some of the films we do occasionally get a glimpse of some locals, as props in an exotic Oriental setting. The reduction of the local population to objects equivalent to camels and palm trees is in itself problematic, and

becomes even more troubling when considering that especially the inhabitants of Alexandria – then a major port for the British Navy – suffered greatly from German and Italian air bombardment.

The locals are clearly not considered to fill the mythical role as Victim. In fact, death threatening or hitting (white) British and German soldiers is often described in a way that clearly places *them* in the mythical function of the Victim, while non-whites – civilians as well as soldiers fighting in the British imperial army – are usually excluded from the narrative. Although the British imperial past is not avoided as such, it is clear that it is a sensitive issue. Thus, it is never problematised that the British are in Egypt, as this is most often presented as a natural state of affairs. In contrast to the British *presence* in the Middle East, where they are defending Egypt, the word *empire* is almost exclusively connected to Mussolini's wish to create a “new Roman Empire”, thus something negative. *Imperial nostalgia* is here almost nostalgia for a mythical time when chivalric and just (north-) Europeans ruled the world, defending culture and civilisation from the threats of barbarians. Especially considering the geographical settings there are obvious connotations to the Crusades, which also alludes to present-day political narratives based on the presumed idea of “the clash of civilizations”.

To conclude: although both the verbal accounts in the films and the frequently shown maps do present the names of towns and villages, the people that would logically be their inhabitants seem to be virtually non-existent. What does this mean? Whose lives matter, and whose do not? Further: what kind of places are we dealing with – what is their history, their function, and what constitutes their existence? According to Marc Augé there are places and non-places, where the latter are characterised by (among other things) a lack of history and other qualities than filling a certain practical function. In this case the settlements are clearly *non-places*: their only function is that of being points on maps, strategic objects indicating victory or defeat, and distances between armies. - How do representations such as these affect not only Western popular memory of WWII, but possibly also current relations between 'ordinary people' in the Western world and in the MENA region?

### **Curriculum vitae (short version)**

**Eva Kingsepp**, PhD in Media and Communication studies in 2008, is a researcher and senior lecturer at Karlstad University, Sweden. Her research mainly deals with popular memory cultures and the uses of history with a special interest in questions about modernity and identity, especially the relation fact/fiction and reality/imagination in the construction of knowledge. Her doctoral dissertation examines the representations and reception of Nazi Germany in contemporary popular culture. Focusing on films and digital games, the study combines media text analysis with ethnography and reception studies. The study, as well as further research on different aspects of the topic, including an edited volume, has attracted both national and international attention, and has resulted in numerous guest lectures, conference presentations, radio interviews and scholarly as well as popular articles.

Her postdoctoral project examines popular history on World War II in North Africa and the Middle East, with a focus on representations in documentary films about the North Africa Campaign, especially the battles of El Alamein in 1942. The study compares popular memory in the West and in Egypt, using a framework including theories dealing with postcolonialism and orientalism, performativity, and hegemonic narratives.

### **Selected publications:**

*Hitler für alle: Populärkulturella perspektiv på Nazityskland, andra världskriget och Förintelsen* ("Hitler für alle: Popular culture perspectives on Nazi Germany, World War II and the Holocaust"). Co-editor with Tanja Schult; author of introductory chapter on popular culture and its relation to Nazi Germany. Stockholm: Carlsson Bokförlag 2012

"Ethics in World War II First Person Shooter Games", pp. 303-323 in Malliet, Steven & Karolien Poels (eds.) *Vice City Virtue: Moral Issues in Digital Game Play*. Leuven: Acco Academic 2011

"Hitler as our Devil? Mainstream representations of Nazi Germany in Popular media", pp. 29-52 in Abbenhuis-Ash, Maartje & Sara Buttsworth (eds.) *Monsters in the Mirror: Representations of Nazism in Popular Culture*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger 2010

*Nazityskland i populärkulturen: Minne, myt, medier (Nazi Germany in Popular Culture: Memory, Myth, Media)*. PhD thesis. Stockholm: Stockholm University, JMK 2008. Available at <http://www.diva-portal.org/su/theses/abstract.xsql?dbid=8164> (abstract and summary in English)

"Fighting hyperreality with hyperreality: History and death in World War II digital games", pp. 366-375 in *Games & Culture*, Vol. 2, No. 4, Oct. 2007

"Immersive Historicity in World War II Digital Games", pp. 61-90 in *HUMAN IT* No. 8.2 2006 (Available at <http://etjanst.hb.se/bhs/ith/2-8/index.htm>)

"Das Dritte Reich als Nervenkitzel: Formen des Umgangs mit Nazi-Deutschland und dem Zweiten Weltkrieg in der zeitgenössigen Populärkultur", pp. 409-425 in Thomas, Tanja & Fabian Virchow