Profiteers and war graves do not mix

The 20th century bequeathed an appalling legacy of unidentified graves, not least in eastern Europe and Russia. Eleven million Soviet soldiers were killed or went missing on the Eastern Front. After the war their resting places were often forgotten or concealed. In recent years the remains of over a million Russian and German soldiers have been reburied. Archaeology can help personal and political healing and add detail to the course of sketchily recorded events. Many people are seeking out lost graves, and recently two broadcasters invited us into the unsettling world of battlefield excavation.

In Russia: Digging up the Dead (bbc Radio 4, January), Lucy Ash introduced us to Olga Ivishina, a journalist who digs in her spare time. She works with a team of amateur archaeologists, searching for the remains of Russian soldiers, whose bodies, they say, were deliberately hidden by tree plantations. “I am driven to keep searching the forest,” says one of the diggers. “There will be work for our grandchildren,” says another, “but the more years go by the less information there is.” One man describes the ghosts of dead soldiers, guiding him through the trees, waking him in his tent at night. Ash attends the reburial of the remains of 1,625 men, and talks to grateful relatives of some of those identified. “We need to do this”, says a digger, scorning official war ceremonies. “So our souls can be at peace. It’s become the meaning of our lives.”

The second broadcaster promised to show us excavation in action. In March National Geographic announced a series of four films, to be premiered in the U.K. Like the radio programme, the films would follow a team at the Eastern Front. Uncovering “the remains of soldiers from both sides”, they would explore “ethical ways to preserve our history and the dignity of the people who made it”.

The series was named Nazi War Diggers. A preview (the broadcaster cut it from its website, but you can see it on YouTube courtesy of the good people at Arachosoup Productions) showed excited men scrabbling around in the dirt and playing with human remains. “Don’t snap anything or break anything,” advises one of the gang, as a colleague demonstrates his specialist skills by matching a human leg bone against his arm.

Notwithstanding apologetic pleading from National Geographic and the films’ British maker, ClearStory, this series is a world class mistake. If you seek to “respect” the dead and promote “responsible metal detecting” (ClearStory), you do not ask a team of one American and three British-based men – with no proven archaeological expertise – to dig up another nation’s graves. You do not ignore the advice of professional archaeologists with experience of military archaeology and exhumation. You do not allow one of your diggers, in your own promotional material, to say he sells “things that are Nazi related… for lots of money”. You do not release sensational video clips, nor call your films Nazi War Diggers.

But if you want to stir up a fuss and attract viewers, as National Geographic knows, you do exactly that. The broadcaster previously released a pilot for an American series called Diggers. Two men known in the detecting community for their “awesome, bizarre and insane” videos and their business selling antiquities, were to be seen excavating a National Register-listed site apparently without a permit. Archaeologists protested, online material was taken down, and National Geographic blamed others. That was in 2012. This February NatGeo launched its second season of Diggers, with the same two men.

There are big stories to tell about the Eastern Front that need no fabrication, that matter to us all and, in some cases, that should be exposed. In the poorly policed landscapes, war grave excavation takes many forms. Olga Ivishina trowels ribs out of tree roots. Elsewhere, teams of men risk their lives unearthing bones and unexploded ordnance with detectors and jcb’s, to bring “peace” through mass reburials – though probably failing to identify as many individuals as they might. Others are interested in what they can sell. There are over 100 corroded German world war two identification tags on eBay, 37 of them from Latvia.

Who is making films about this? Individual archaeologists sometimes criticise such activities, but where is the profession’s voice? When British citizens dig, it is a British issue. The National Geographic Society can not hide behind the part ownership of its broadcasting channels by 21st Century Fox. There can be no defence for digging up unknown bodies for profit or amusement. The organisations we look to for leadership should say so. ■