"Trauma Objects" and Buildings as War Museums: From the Personal and the Critical to the National and the Heroic

Dalya Yafa Markovich

Dr Dalya Yafa Markovich
Beit Berl College
Faculty of Arts
Kfar Saba, 4490500
Israel
e-mail: Dalya.markovich@beitberl.ac.il
ORCID: 0000-0002-2951-9880

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"Trauma Objects" and Buildings as War Museums: From the Personal and the Critical to the National and the Heroic
This paper examines the interplay between war museums and history from below by analysing initiatives that deal with the civilian communities attacked on October 7 in Israel. The initiatives are based on "trauma objects" and buildings that were damaged in the battles and belonged to members of the community. As leftwing communities that were labelled as "traitors", the preservation initiatives make use of practices from below that could be assumed to take on a sectorial character that challenges the national–heroic discourse and accuses it of abandonment. Analysing the transgressive crossing from above to below reveals that it does not create a crossing from the national to the personal or from the heroic to the critical. On the contrary, it is precisely the curatorial practices from below that have helped nationalise the narrative, deny rifts and rebuild the consensus. The findings ask about the possibility of avoiding a curation of effacement through actions from below in the representation of war.

Keywords: military museums; material culture; history from above/below; national/personal narrative; heroic/critical

Shaping the historical narrative is an important tool of state power and of the nation. In this context, it is impossible to overstate the national importance ascribed to presenting the historical narrative in war museums.[1] Extensive research literature has dealt with the curatorial practices and representation methods at war museums through which the state often attempts to construct and manage national identity and collective memory, also known as narrative "from above".[2] The narrative from above is mediated by war museums through the extensive use of rare and even sacred military material culture[3] that facilitates the shaping of a stable, linear and closed narrative that produces national and heroic discourse.[4] War museums are reluctant to represent a history from below that integrates personal and civilian voices possessing a critical

[1] MOSSE, George L. *Fallen soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1990, ISBN 0195062477.
[2] WINTER, Jay. In: MUCHITSCH, Wolfgang (ed.). *Does War Belong in Museums?* Bielfield: transcript Verlang, 2013, pp. 21–37. ISBN 978-3837623062.
[3] WELLINGTON, Jennifer. *Exhibiting War: The Great War, Museums, and Memory in Britain, Canada, and Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2017, ISBN 978-1107135079.
[4] SOON-WON, Park, DAQING, Yang, and GI-WOOK, Shin. In: SOON-WON, Park. et al. (eds.). *Rethinking Historical Injustice and Reconciliation in Northeast Asia*. New York: Routledge, 2007, pp. 149–169. ISBN: 9780203967041.

agency that might act against the national narrative and evoke an "uncomfortable" history.[5] This conceptualisation has consolidated a binary formula according to which curatorial practices from below undermine those from above, personal discourse contests the national one, and the critical takes the place of the heroic.

War museums in Israel also tend to mediate history from above through the extensive use of military material culture. As such, they fulfil the much-discussed role of constructing a cohesive national identity.[6] The history of war from below is heard mostly on the margins of the military museum space, giving voice to the refusenik or the Palestinian "other".[7] This tradition will face new challenges after 7 October 2023. The attack, which started at 6:29 am, targeted mostly the civilian communities located near the Israel–Gaza border (also called the "Gaza Envelope"). Communities were invaded, their residents were brutally murdered and kidnapped, and their properties were looted and burned. Most of the communities in the "Gaza Envelope" identify with the Israeli leftwing movement that conducted intensive demonstrations against the rightwing government before the war and was thus labelled by large parts of Israeli society as a "privileged hegemony", a "fifth wheel" and even as "traitorous".[8] After the loss that these communities suffered, two major initiatives conducted by the Israel Antiquities Authority and Yad Ben Zvi Institute were entrusted with collecting, conserving and displaying the personal objects and buildings that were impacted by the attack, in order to preserve the material culture of war. Although these initiatives are acting on behalf of the state, they are characterised by curational practices from below: the items gathered possess an everyday life, they have an ordinary and civilian character, giving rise to a mobile and fragmentary display of familiar and distinctly unheroic material culture. This curatorial decision stands in stark contrast to the way war is represented in museums both around the world and in Israel. Thus, one could assume that this approach creates a sectorial display that challenges the national–heroic discourse and points to failures in defending the home front resulting from various sociopolitical interests, such as the intentional abandonment of the "traitors" from the left.

This study examines whether using curatorial practices from below has indeed produced a historical narrative that challenges history from above. Has the personal narrative replaced the national one and challenged the heroic with a critical alternative? By analysing the character of the collections and the narratives presented in the numerous interviews given by directors and employees of the initiatives, this unique material-scape was examined against the backdrop of the binary distinction between history from above/below. In light of the analysis, I argue that crossing the lines from above to below does not necessarily attest to a displacement of the plane of reference from the national to the personal and from the heroic to the critical. Moreover, it is precisely the use of personal history from below that allowed for the expropriation of

[5] CAIADO, André. The Representation of "Difficult Pasts" in Military Museums: The Portuguese Colonial War in the Portuguese Armed Forces Museums. In: *Museum Worlds*, 10(1), 2022, pp. 61–77. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/tdevorado.240; JONES, Simon. Making Histories of War. In: KAVANAGH, Gaynor (ed.). *Making histories in museums*. Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1996, pp. 152–162. ISBN: 978-0718500078.

[6] See, for example, ALMOG, Oz. *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

[7] ODED, Shay. Hamuseonim bechevra ha'arevit beIsrael kamkor lebitui leumi vehamorshet shel ha'ochlusiya hamekomit, Ofkim begeografia [Folklore Memorials and nationalism: Museums and collections in Israel's Arab society], In: *Horizons in Geography*, 77, 2011, pp. 74–88. [In Hebrew]

[8] See, for example, KORIEL, Ilana. "Hitlehamot shel shney hatzdadim": hakaba"t sheyara baavir bechatzarim shoochrar lema'atzar bait. *Ynet*, 25 July 2023, ["Blatantry on Both Sides": The Officer Who Fired in the Air in the Premises was Released to House Arrest] accessed 5 May 2026, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/bj2e47pq3. [In Hebrew]

the war from the local plane, the denial of sectorial conflicts, the initiation of processes of nationalisation, and the re-establishment of the national consensus. This claim calls for a re-examination of the museal presentation of war from below, and questions the possibility of reshaping the relations between the individual and the state's agents of memory through curatorial practices from below.

Transformations in representing and curating the history of war from above in the military museum

The struggle between history of war from above and history of war from below centres on defining the trustworthiness of the sources of information that feed the historical narrative, and the extent to which they correspond with the complex reality they describe.[9] The methodological rejection of the definition of "scientific objectivity", perceived as part and parcel of a specific sociopolitical context, has made it possible to voice views and objects from below. Voices and objects from below are testimonies of "ordinary people/objects" that witnessed the historical event in real-time (in the case of people) from their own subjective point of view. Although voices from below are no less caught up in varying context and agencies, the simultaneous existence of different positions and points of view allows for the democratisation and pluralisation of the historical narrative from above. The historical struggle has found its expression in the representation of war in museums as well. The museum establishment tends to present the history of war from above, as part of the effort to construct a cohesive national identity. The display from above uses rare representations of material culture combined with simulations, visual fabrication, staging, acoustic realism and audio-augmented objects that create a generalised narrative of war.[10] These methods of representing and curating the material culture are usually based on stable, linear and closed narratives that turn the museum into a carrier of national, heroic and patriotic discourse.[11]

Narratives from below that tell unheroic or controversial stories dealing with defeat and trauma become spaces of struggle[12] and employ practices of repression and amnesia in order to avoid offending patriotic pride and national consensus.[13] Even when the war museum wishes to represent a picture of the past that causes unease, it is usually toned down so as not to offend the viewers' feelings.[14] Only in states in which the forces of nationalism are weakened and war is a distant memory do war museums tend to focus on historical–technological aspects of military equipment, rather than on its national–heroic aspects.

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[9] WHITE, Hayden. The Value of Narrativity in Representation of Reality. In: *Critical Inquiry*, 7(1), 1980, pp. 5–27. DOI: https://10.1086/448086.

[10] BEN-AMOS, Avner. The Palmach Museum in Tel Aviv: The Past as a Space of Education, Entertainment and Discipline. In: *Museum History Journal*, 8(2), 2015, pp. 147–167. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1179/1936981615Z.00000000047; CLIFFE, Laurence. Interfacing with History: Curating with Audio Augmented Objects. In: *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 41(1), 2024, pp. 143–161. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2024.2431899.

[11] HAYMOND, John A. The Muted Voice: The Limitations of Museums and the Depiction of Controversial History. In: *Museums & Society*, 13(4), 2015, pp. 462–468. DOI: https://doi.org/10.29311/mas.v13i4.347.

[12] CRANE, Susan A. Memory, Distortion and History in the Museum. In: *History and Theory*, 36(4), 1997, pp. 44–63. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.00030.

[13] BOWES, Stuart. On Museums, Conflict, and Forgetting: An Immutable Cultural Heritage? In: *Working Papers in the Humanities*, 17, 2022, pp. 45–53. DOI: https://10.59860/wph.a589b42.

[14] CERCLE, Cristian. The Military History Museum in Dresden: Between Forum and Temple. In: *History and Memory*, 30(1), 2018, pp. 3–39. DOI: https://10.2979/histmemo.30.1.02.

A dramatic change in the museal representation of war began with the increasing legitimacy given to voices and objects from below that represented the margins of the battlefield: civilians, women fighters, refugees, antiwar movements and other "others". These war museums have adopted curatorial methods that deconstruct the conception of the museums as a sacred "temple" and create agonistic encounters.[15] Some of them even juxtapose contrasting narratives in order to create a shared transnational story,[16] or decentralise heritage-scapes through performative means that create multilayered knowledge and cultural/historical resistance.[17] Some have even introduced fantasy and fiction as means of confronting the harsh events of war. However, these efforts do not always reach an agreed-upon outcome,[18] and have even been perceived by visitors as propaganda.[19]

Transformations in representing and curating the history of war from above in the military museum: the Israeli case

History from above has been the dominant component in linking Israel's wars with its national–Zionist identity. Military history from above began to be undermined only after the First Intifada and the First Lebanon War, and in light of the civil and political crises created by these events.[20] However, the challenge to history from above in Israel did not come from below, and barely represented voices from below. The discourse that critiqued history from above was mainly produced by senior historians who worked at leading universities and earned the moniker "The New Historians".[21] More than representing a struggle from below, these historians represented an intergenerational and interinstitutional struggle between competing elites. A history of war from below, based on personal voices of Jewish civilians and combatants who challenged the history of war from above and the national–heroic narrative it validated, was very seldom heard. These voices were represented only in a handful of initiatives, for example: critical voices of soldiers represented as part of the "Breaking the Silence" project.[22]

The marginal presence of any history of war from below is also reflected in the map of war museums in Israel. Israel is saturated with museums dedicated to wars, since the country has been in a state of war almost since its foundation in 1948. Despite being a relatively small country, there are 20 active official war sites and museums in Israel, operated either by the Israeli Defence Force or by various government ministries or associations affiliated with government ministries. The first museal institution in Israel to deal with war and its victims

[15] BULL, Anna C., HANSEN, Hans L., KANSTEINER, Wulf, and PARISH, Nina. War Museums as Agonistic Spaces: Possibilities, Opportunities and Constraints. In: *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 25(6), 2019, pp. 611–625. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2018.1530288

[16] KRUMEICH, Gerd. Divided Heritage on the Hartmannswillerkopf. In: MARKOVICH, Dalya Y & DATSCH Christiane (eds.). *Shared Heritage Revisited. National and Postnational Dimensions on the Example of Germans, Palestinians and Israelis*. Bielfield: transcript Verlang, 2024, pp. 355–372. ISBN: 978-3-8394-6699-5.

[17] REEVES, Audrey, and HEATH-KELLY, Charlotte. Curating Conflict: Political Violence in Museums, Memorials, and Exhibitions. In: *Critical Military Studies*, 6(3–4), 2020, pp. 243–253. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2020.1797328

[18] KOHN, Richard H. History and the Culture Wars: The Case of the Smithsonian Institution's Enola Gay Exhibition. In: *Journal of American History,* 82(3), 1995, pp. 1036–1063. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/2945111.

[19] CLARKE, David and WOYCICKA, Zofia. Cultural Diplomacy in the War Museum: The case of the German-Russian Museum Berlin-Karlshorts. In: *History and Memory* 31(2), 2019, pp. 78–116. DOI: 10.2979/histmemo.31.2.0078.

[20] RAM, Uri. Zichron vezahut: sotziologya shel vikuch hahistoryonim beIsrael, Te'oria vebikoret [Memory and identity: Sociology of the historians' debate in Israel], In: *Theory and Criticism* 8, 1996, pp. 9–32. [In Hebrew]

[21] MORRIS, Benny. The new historiography: Israel confronts its past. In: *Tikkun* 3(6), 1988, pp. 19–23, 99–102.

[22] https://www.shovrimshtika.org/about/organization

was Yad Vashem, dedicated to the millions of Jews murdered in the Second World War (the Holocaust). Since the foundation of Yad Vashem, there has been a dichotomous distinction between museums dedicated to soldiers and those dedicated to civilians; between those fallen in the state of Israel and those murdered in the Diaspora. Only in exceptional cases are Jewish soldiers who fought in the uniforms of other armies in the Diaspora represented, such as in two veteran museums founded by immigrants from the former USSR who had fought in the Red Army in the Second World War.[23]

Most of the war museums narrate a history from above, adopting curatorial methods that seek to assert ownership of the land, to create a Jewish narrative continuum between past and present,[24] and to establish intergenerational ideological continuity.[25] Changes in the museal representation of war began only after the "great wars" between Israel and the Arab states ended; with some of these states Israel even signed peace agreements or established alliances and cooperations (for example, Egypt, Jordan, the Maronite Christians in Lebanon). When the First Intifada broke out, the Middle East was ignited again – and with it the arena of war museology. The volatile and bloody atmosphere stirred up a renewed struggle over the way war events were presented in the museum, and over the curatorial methods employed. A new kind of war museum dedicated to the struggle between Israel and Palestine started to appear and be updated in "real-time". One example of this is The Israeli Intelligence and Terrorism Centre in Ramat Hasharon (and its counterpart, Abu Jihad Museum in Palestine). These museums adopted a dynamic approach to curation that provided an active interpretation of current events reported from "the field". The exhibits (for instance, ammunition taken as booty), methods of representation (for example, photographic documentation of events), and modes of representation (such as simulations of a prison cell or a terrorist tunnel), turned them into arenas of activity in the national struggle between the two groups. These curatorial methods turned the war museums themselves into active "conflict zones".[26] Another kind of museum that started operating in the arena of war museums is the "mini war museum". These are hosted by civilian museums that do not normally engage with war, and present objects from the civilian quotidian that tell the story of war. One such example is the Egged Bus Museum in Holon, which presents the history of Israel's bus company. Alongside historical buses, there are special exhibits showing the No. 2094 bus that was attacked at Nehalim Junction, and the burned Coastal Highway bus that was hijacked and blown up with its passengers. Despite these new representational practices that correspond with real-time reality and integrate the real-time reality of war into "regular" museums, these changes kept reinforcing narratives from above. War museums founded after the First Intifada, like those that preceded them,

[23] ROBERMAN, Sveta. From Exclusion to Inclusion: Jewish WWII Soldiers in the Israeli National Narrative. In: *Israel studies*, 14(2), 2009, pp. 50–71. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2979/isr.2009.14.2.50.

[24] AMIT, Gish. "Kibush hayam ha'avri": Museon hetse"l kbity letfisat hyam be'atos harbizyonisti, Te'oria Vebikoret ["The conquest of the Hebrew sea": The IZL museum as an expression of the sea's perception in the revisionist ethos], In: *Theory and Criticism*, 24, 2024, pp. 113–131 [In Hebrew]; BROOD, Offer. The War of Independence Exhibited: A study of Three Israeli Museums. In: *Israel Studies*, 21(1), 2016, pp. 82–108. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2979/israelstudies.21.1.82. [In Hebrew]

[25] FRENKEL ALROY, Tal. Beit Hapalam"ch: goof reshon rabim – polifoniot ketfisha matodologit vecetafisat olam estetit, Te'oria vehistoria [Beit Hapalmach: First person plural. A memorial site as a polyphonic space]. In: *History and Theory*. https://journal.bezalel.ac.il/archive/3974. [In Hebrew]

[26] MENDEL, Yonatan and STEINBERG, Rose A. The Musicological Side of the Conflict: Israeli Exhibition of Terror and the Palestinian Museum of Prisoners. In: *Museum & Society* 9(3), 2011, pp. 190–213. DOI: https://doi.org/10.29311/mas.v9i3.184.

have similarly engaged with history as a means to create political justifications and strengthen national cohesion.

Methodology

The study focuses on initiatives led by the Israeli state that seek to document and represent the historical account of the war that took place on 7 October 2023, in the Gaza Envelopes communities. The attack, which started at 6:29 am, was directed at a specific sector in Israeli society: residents of the kibbutzim and rural communities adjacent to the border with the Gaza Strip. The population of the attacked communities was mostly composed of Jews from the Ashkenazi and secular middle class, who traditionally belong to the Israeli left. Some of the residents were prominent peace activists who had taken part in protests against the judicial reforms (called "regime change" by their opponents) led by the rightwing government on the eve of the murderous attack. In light of this, this sector was identified by large parts of the Israeli society as "traitors". Some of the victims' words after 7 October even hinted at a deliberate abandonment of the Gaza Envelope communities, due to their labelling as a distinct identity group that actively opposed the Right's measures and even aspired to topple the government.

The initiatives started operating a number of weeks after the attack. Their activities form part of an integrated move by ministries and government bodies seeking to create a future museal "heritage space" recounting the battles in the Gaza Envelope for future generations. The initiatives collectively fall under the responsibility of the Prime Minister's Office. The two initiatives examined here are operated by the Israel Antiquities Authority and Yad Ben Zvi Institute.

The Israel Antiquities Authority conducted photographic documentation to create 3D simulations of all the buildings damaged in the battles, including private homes, public buildings and a *migunit* (concrete structure erected in public spaces that serves as a mobile shelter). The simulations were created using drones, photogrammetric technology and laser scanning. Creating a 3D model of one structure requires 35,000 pictures taken from every possible angle. To date, the initiative has created models of 500 damaged buildings in some 20 communities. A total of 350 terabytes of data holding around 2 million pictures were collected for this purpose. The simulations will be uploaded to the Web, where they will serve as a virtual museum in which anyone from anywhere in the world will be able to enter the battlefield and walk around it. Some of the reconstructions have already been made accessible to the public, among them the site of the Nova festival in the state it was found after the massacre was carried out.

The initiative operated by Yad Ben Zvi Institute is charged with collecting, documenting and storing all the objects that were damaged in the homes and public buildings in which battles were fought in the civilian communities. The collection of such objects is subject to approval by the surviving families of those murdered. Each item taken out of the houses is given a catalogue number and is recorded in the Eshmor system – heritage collection management software developed for the initiative. So far, the initiative has collected thousands of items. It is still unclear under what museal framework will be applied and how the objects will be presented to the public. What the two initiatives have in common is their engagement with the scene of a war that took place in civilian communities and the desire to go back to the things themselves – to the ways in which the victims were living until the catastrophe struck and to the brutal way in which their daily routine was cut short.

The initiatives were examined using a wide variety of sources. Firstly, public lectures given by the initiatives' directors were attended and documented. Secondly, all the reports on the initiatives and the interviews of the initiatives' directors and workers made by the Israeli written media were collected. This included surveying six newspapers, news websites and magazines during the two-year period in which the initiatives operated (2023/2024). The reports and interviews were written by various authors representing right and left political agendas in Israel: *Haaretz*, *Israel Hayom*, *Davar*, *Calcalist*, *Zman Israel* and *Ynet*. Thirdly, a survey was conducted of the recorded reports produced by Israel's public broadcasting corporation channel: Kan 11. Using critical discourse analysis,[27] the narratives of the agents of memory were cross-referenced with the written and filmed narratives and examined by means of a thematic analysis. The analysis identified two discourse shifts: "from the personal to the national" and "from the critical to the heroic". This led to examination of the political–ideological foundations of the initiatives.

Building War Museums from Below: From the Personal to the National

The initiatives are based on the material culture – objects and buildings – that remained in the Gaza Envelope communities after the fierce battles that took place there. The objects and buildings that were damaged in battle serve as central witnesses for the historical account and the display. Giving the power of testimony to a "third party" relies on the assumption that the objects/buildings left on the scene store the echoes of the war. As mentioned, this notion is not new to war museums. Nor is taking items out of their immediate space and context (the communities that turned into battlefields) and moving them to new space and context (the museum) perceived as compromising their role. However, in most war museums the items exhibited are carefully selected. The objects/buildings that find their way into exhibition spaces are rare and generalised military objects/buildings – weapons, helmets, bunkers – which represent the war symbolically and even become sacred. As representatives of the historical narrative from above, the militaristic–national connotation of these objects/buildings is clear. Most objects/buildings were left on the battlefield and will, with the exception of those on display, find their way into the dustbin of history.

The objects and buildings that comprise the future war museum of the Gaza Envelope communities differ fundamentally from the inventory described above. The rare is replaced by the ordinary, the generalised–sacred by everyday life, and the military by the civilian, giving the exhibitions the characteristic of war museums from below.

Firstly, the Antiquities Authority and Yad Ben Zvi people in charge of the conservation process indiscriminately and without sorting record and scan every damaged building and collect and scan every damaged object. They also collected bodily remains, which were handed over to ZAKA (Disaster Victim Identification) for burial according to Jewish tradition.[28] Rarity is thus replaced by multiplicity. All the attacked houses were scanned, and the scans catalogued and stored in archives. Objects underwent a process of bureaucratic organisation: logging, description, photography, packing, transporting, and temporary storage. The idea guiding the conservers is that every object/building that was at the battle scene has a story to tell. All of them hold within them the remnants of war. As Dr Nirit Shalev-Khalifa, Director of the Department of Visual History, Documentation and Curation at Yad Ben-Zvi explains, "It can

[27] FAIRCLOUGH, N. Critical Discourse Analysis. In: GEE, James Paul & HANDFORD Michael (eds.). *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. New York: Routledge, 2023, pp. 9–20. ISBN: 978-0-203-80906-8.

[28] *Davar: With the Help of Archeologists: At Least 18 Victims Defined as Missing have been Identified*, accessed 5 May 2026, https://www.davar1.co.il/462303/. [In Hebrew]

be for example a Tami4 filtered water device that was shot or burned and no longer looks like it did before [...] We built and examine each and every object that was damaged."[29]

Fig. 1: *Destroyed House in Kibbutz Kfar Aza.* Photograph: Dalya Markovich.

Every object and building is defined as an important "slice of life" that constitutes a direct testimony of the war. There is no hierarchy of importance. The multiplicity of objects and buildings paint the "big picture" with as much precision as possible. As Shalev-Khalifa explains: "We try to draw a picture of where everything stood in the house, from a glass that was placed on the table to wall drawings that were there and [are] now burned."[30]

The same strategy was applied in scanning the buildings. As David Zell, Head of Research, Development and Heritage at the Antiquities Authority and the initiative's executive director, explains, "We produce a digital model with precision down to the millimetre […] that allows you to produce a 3D model with a texture like an incredibly sharp picture".[31]

The collected objects and buildings, the damaged fragments dredged up from the "field", were turned by the conservationists into a 1:1-scale war map. This is neither a simulation of reality made using rare or unique objects/buildings rescued from the battlefield, nor a simulacrum of reality made by reenacting these rare or unique objects/buildings. The wish to collect everything is the wish to create a complete story that stands against the partiality inherent to any museum or archive.[32] However, the multiplicity of voices from below was not meant to create a multiplicity of positions or sectorial identities. Rather, as Nathaniel Isaac, Director General of the Heritage Ministry, puts it, it was meant to show the exhibits as they "were received and collected and photographed in real time".[33] (see Figure 1). As Zell argues, this approach is "Objective and true to the original [being based on] coordinates and with no significant intervention by the documenter".[34] The multiplicity, therefore, presumes to represent the past, piece by piece, in "real time" and in an "objective" and apolitical way that

[29] RUBINSTEIN, Roy. How Will We Remember 7 October? This is How the State Conducts the Complex Race to Commemorate the Massacre. *Ynet*, accessed 5 May 2026, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/hyrxuyfwa. [In Hebrew]

[30] LEVI, Eyal. Shimur hazichron hamar: haproyekt shemetaad et heres 7 beoctover [Preserving the Bitter Memory: The Project Documenting the Destruction of 7 October]. *Israel Hayom*, 7 January 2024, accessed 5 May 2026, https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/local/article/15057391. [In Hebrew]

[31] *Calcalist: Heartbreak at 3D: The Huge Documentation Project of the 7 October Massacre*, accessed 5 May 2026, https://www.calcalist.co.il/real-estate/article/r1hifai2a. [In Hebrew]

[32] MBEMBE, Achille. The Power of the Archive and its Limits. In HAMILTON, Carolyn et al. (eds.). *Refiguring the Archive*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2002, pp. 19–27. ISBN: 1402007434.

[33] *KAN 11: So They Cannot Deny: A Glimpse at the Huge Memory Project that will* Commemorate the Horrors of 7 October through Advanced Technology, accessed 5 May 2026, https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan-news/newst-v/p-11894/s1/657742. [In Hebrew]

[34] *Davar: A Day at Kibbutz Nir Oz with the Team Documenting the Envelope's Ruins*, accessed 5 May 2026, https://www.davar1.co.il/482710/. [In Hebrew]

strips away the documentation of any characteristics of identity and belonging to a particular group.

Fig. 2: *Objects in a house in Kibbutz Be'eri.* Photograph: Dalya Markovich.

Secondly, the testimonial power of the objects and buildings collected in the initiatives is attributed to their everyday life character. The power of the representation of everyday life allows it to replace the rare-generalised objects and buildings with the common original – "the thing in itself". Each of the objects/buildings is perceived as an "untouched" capsule of everyday life space/time of all Israelis. Everyday life therefore constitutes a direct expression of the common, which refuses to become a generalised rare or iconic representation. There are no metonymies among the conserved objects and buildings, for example: a bulletproof vest representing an infantry soldier or a concrete block representing a bunker. Ami Shahar, Director of Conservation at the Antiquities Authority, says: "In the end the user will be able to open and see this thing and wander around in it the way it was" (i.e. when it was a "regular" part of Israel).[35] In such an interpretive space, in which generalisation is replaced by the desire to capture all everyday life originals and all the ordinary details "as they were", there is only denotation: the objects and the buildings that were damaged in battle are the common objects and the buildings in which every Israeli lives. Thus, their power does not stem from the symbolism they contain but precisely from the lack of symbolism and from their ordinary character that resembles "all of us" (see Image 2).

If there is any connotation, then it refers to the ultimate Jewish catastrophe: the Holocaust. The Holocaust is described as the event which is experienced and felt when encountering the damaged everyday life objects/buildings. In other words, the ensemble of everyday life objects/buildings represents *the* Jewish catastrophe of all the Jews in Israel and the world. For example, Shimon Elkabetz, father of the late Sivan Elkabetz, who preserved all of Sivan's belongings in her destroyed apartment at kibbutz Kfar Aza, observes, "Even after the ZAKA people cleaned the atrocities [dismembered bodies and body parts], it's difficult to look at. During a tour you feel like you're in Auschwitz.[36]

Internet commentators wrote similar words after being exposed to vandalised everyday life objects/buildings. As one commentator wrote: "It feels like items from the Holocaust period, God what has happened to us!! It's still not registering" (broken heart emoji).[37] Everyday life thus breaks through the borders of the community-based historical event into the distant collective past ("Auschwitz", "The Holocaust") and common Israeli current life. This is a space that has been diverted from a sectorial status to an ethnic–national one, making it possible to rescue the local and the particular from the attacked categories of "privileged leftist hegemony", "fifth wheel" and "traitorous" and integrate them into the Jewish people's continuum of national events.

[35] *Zman Israel:* Conserving the Catastrophe: The Antiquities Authority Documents the Destruction in the Gaza Envelope, accessed 5 May 2026, https://www.zman.co.il/512537/popup. [In Hebrew]
[36] *Calcalist: Heartbreak at 3D: The Huge Documentation Project of the 7 October Massacre*, accessed 5 May 2026, https://www.calcalist.co.il/real-estate/article/r1hifai2a. [In Hebrew]
[37] Ibidem.

Thirdly, objects from civilian areas were collected. The military objects/buildings that typically star in war museums are replaced here by civilian ones drawn from everyday ordinary life (see Figure 3).

Fig. 3: *Objects in a house in Kibbutz Be'eri.*
Photograph: Dalya Markovich.

Through the objects/buildings, the initiatives aim to reconstruct private day-to-day life from below, from the intimacy of the disrupted civilian space. It is an intimacy that exists in the first-person singular, and thus creates a civilian personalisation of the war, expropriating it from the battalions, brigades, divisions, bases, corps and macro-military manoeuvres. The result is the civilian material culture of an area that has become military, and in which there is no representation of the army or of militarism. In other words, it is a display of war articulated through the home and through civilian homeware. However, the narrative created by the civilian picture from below is not separate from the military one. According to Eli Escusido, Director General of the Antiquities Authority, "People will be able to search for every house […] and see how the Envelope's residents lived before the attack, and what happened in the houses during and after it", i.e., when the area became a military zone.[38] The civilian narrative thus not only overlaps with the military one, but also complements it and the sense of national solidarity it wishes to create.

To sum up, in an unusual curatorial move, the initiatives are gathering material culture from below, with no sorting or selection, and based on all the regular everyday life objects and buildings that were damaged in the civilian area. These practices turn their backs on the material culture that represents the story of war from above, and on the modes of its representation. Ostensibly, by using material culture from below, the war narrative should be displaced onto a more personal level, enabling the surfacing of unique representations and sectorial (ethnic, class and ideological) differences. But in wishing to encompass the whole of reality, the objects and buildings do not seek to create multivocal pluralism. On the contrary, the multiplicity of voices from below does not testify to a multiplicity of positions, identities or social and ideological positionings. The ordinary objects of everyday life and civilian testimonies actually serve to expropriate the event from the personal/communal dimension and reintegrate it in the national narrative in order to strengthen the national consensus. "We are here to document a national memory",[39] said a representative of the Antiquities Authority people. Blurring the boundary between the personal and the national and between the civilian and the military turns the entire home and country into one fighting front, restoring the definition of the collective as a nation under attack fighting for its survival. The personal voice from below reestablishes the voices of the agents of national history and heritage precisely by exhibiting the individuals and their private loss.

[38] RUBINSTEIN, Roy. How Will We Remember 7 October?...

[39] *KAN 11: So They Cannot Deny: A Glimpse at the Huge Memory Project that will* Commemorate the Horrors of 7 October through Advanced Technology, accessed 5 May 2026, https://www.kan.org.il/content/kan-news/newst-v/p-11894/s1/657742. [In Hebrew]

Building War Museums from Below: From the Critical to the Heroic?

Sites and museums that present the history of war from above usually produce a display characterised by a stable narrative that tells a story linearly and is based on exhibits that embody the heroic and the extraordinary. Stability is achieved by locating the exhibits in a permanent building usually directly affiliated with the landscape and the symbolic space in which the events the museum presumes to describe took place.[40] At the same time, the space–time experience created by the museum differs from the one that exists in reality. The museum's collections seek to reflect the reality in light of a certain ideological thesis, and therefore adopt an approach of "methodological unity" that establishes a linear narrative. Even though the linearity functions at times as a transparent working assumption, its importance lies in its ability to create a war story that resonates with heroic solidarity.

The objects and buildings comprising the future war museum of the Gaza Envelope communities generate a fundamentally different composition from that described above. The stable is replaced by the mobile, the linear is replaced by the fragmentary, and the heroic is replaced by the familiar, giving the exhibitions the characteristics of war museums from below.

Firstly, the narrative of war from below created by the initiatives is characterised by a mobility that replaces the stability and permanence typical of displays from above. This mobility stems from extricating the exhibits from their "natural" space of appearance. Once collected from the battlefield, the objects and buildings function as a nomadic arena moving between different storage spaces – containers, warehouses and internet sites – and between varying exhibition arenas – the Web, public spaces, community centres and campuses. The initiatives are, by definition, sites of continuous transplantation. Dispersing historical narratives in different spaces unconnected to the spaces in which the events took place is perceived as hindering the display's ability to tell a stable and permanent story. The better the historical narrative of the war is embodied in the museum's curation, structure and location, the greater validity it is perceived as having. It seems, however, that in this case it is the spatial mobility of the historical narrative that creates a unifying narrative power. Presenting the story concurrently in diverse spaces creates pockets of war simultaneously sown in every place/time. The nomadic display is mixed with the "day-to-day" and activates the collective dimension by turning the war narrative into a ubiquitous story, the story of all of us. Furthermore, the exhibits' mobility also plucks them from being a static representation of an already-finished past and turns them, in their constant movement, into active elements in the present time and for the next generations.[41]

Secondly, the war narrative from below created by the initiatives relies on a fragmentary collection of objects and buildings, replacing the linear continuum with a partial and broken one. Fragmentary collections stand in contrast to the urge for cohesion that characterises the curatorial methods of war museums from above. Fragmentariness poses a danger. It might turn the war story into a collection of episodes and anecdotes, hampering the tightness and cohesiveness aspired to by the historical narrative from above. The initiatives are deliberately composed of a collection of fragments, a result of the conditions "on the ground" – mainly the multiple areas damaged in the fierce battles. Collecting the objects/buildings together

[40] DROZDZEWSKI, Danielle, WATERTON, Emma, and SUMARTOJO, Shanti. Cultural Memory and Identity in the Context of War: Experiential, Place-Based and Political Concerns. In: *International Review of the Red Cross*, 101(1), 2005, pp. 251–272. DOI: 10.1017/S1816383119000110.

[41] HASSON, Nir. Between Pictures and Bicycles: Here are Stored the Fragments of the Lives of the Residents of the Gaza Envelope. *Haaretz*, accessed 5 May https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/2024-04-22/ty-article-magazine/.premium/0000018f-00a8-d64a-a9af-84eb5c7e0000. [In Hebrew]

constitutes a de-facto narrative dispersion: the wheelbarrow of the late Johnny Siman-Tov from kibbutz Nir Oz; the remains of the doctor's clinic at kibbutz Be'eri; the domestic objects of the residents of Kerem Shalom.[42] Ostensibly, the multiple contexts of the fragmentary collection disrupt the anonymous–generalised unity that enables an object to be turned into a story, and a story into a symbol. However, the fragmentary character of the collection and display method used by the initiatives does not privatise the war story. The numerous and discontinuous parts do not diminish the authority of the national metanarrative. On the contrary, it is the fragmentariness that makes it possible to silence the context in which the exhibits resided and blur their sectorial affiliation, while constructing "intra-textual" relations between the personal and the national. According to Shalev-Khalifa, the objects "are defined as 'trauma objects', that is, an ordinary and everyday object that has changed following a catastrophe. Once it is on display, it has enormous power. Precisely because it has been extricated from its context."[43]

The "trauma objects" are not part of a whole; they are *the* whole that has been extricated from the original context and has become the national whole, serving the nation now and in the future. Shalev-Khalifa continues: "In time [the rescued microscopic parts] will serve to commemorate".[44] And Zell adds: "The models [of the various damaged buildings] can be a virtual museum, a national treasure, which will accompany us for years to come".[45] And Micha Cohen, founder of the Blue Helmets unit that provides emergency response to sites and heritage assets, who was enlisted for the initiative, claims that the Gaza Envelope residents "have experienced a trauma that we have all experienced. It's us, in the present, not a historical story from the past".[46]

The damaged and distorted and scattered parts – "they" – have turned into "us", the first-person plural, and into a "national treasure" belonging to all of us. The power of the fragmentary collection therefore lies in creating a syntax that is bigger than the sum of its parts. It is a syntax that makes it possible to assemble its exhibited parts not as the closed and sectorial stories of closed and labelled communities, at least by some of the Israeli public. It is a syntax that makes it possible to read the trauma of the Gaza Envelope, through the objects/buildings, as a unifying national event, showing no trace of the rifts and controversies afflicting Israeli society.

Thirdly, the war narrative from below created by the collections presents the familiar. The familiar stands in contrast to the heroic tinge attached to objects/buildings that are usually displayed in war museums from above. Before the war broke out, the objects and buildings exuded what every domestic and civilian environment aspires to: a sense of belonging and security. The war expropriated the houses and the objects from their private context. From the moment they were damaged, taken out of context, and placed in an archive, catalogue, internet site or mobile display, the familiar also began to function as an arena of unease, of the

[42] Ibidem.
[43] ABRAMOV, Eti. "Heritage is Part of Resilience": The Belongings of the Kidnapped and Murdered. *Ynet*, accessed 5 May 2026, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/yokra14104268. [In Hebrew]
[44] Ibidem.
[45] Ibidem.
[46] Ibidem.

uncanny. Shalev-Khalifa says, "In one fell swoop, familiar objects became a material and formal testimony of the enormity of the destruction".[47]

However, while the visibility of the familiar–ruined creates a display that emphasises the enormity of the destruction, it refrains from creating a narrative of destruction. It is the familiar, which is simultaneously also threatening and alien, that makes it possible to see the everyday–damaged as a representation of heroism. As Cohen observes, "You see the blood on a simple multi-lock door and think 'Dear God, how do these people carry on?' How do we carry on?"[48] Thus, the damaged banality of the objects/buildings, the familiar ("a simple multi-lock door"), starts to take on a meaning that in principle is absent from it – heroism ("how do these people carry on?"). The banality and familiarity which allow each viewer to see in the exhibits their own reflection and the possible collapse of their own daily routine ("how do we carry on?") also make the object/buildings extraordinary due to their vulnerability, lending them a heroic dimension. The identification creates a double sense of both closeness and distance which deepens the consensus around the familiar–damaged and silences any echoes of the internal social struggles characterising the Israeli society. When identification with the banal is mixed with ascribed qualities of endurance and heroism, it reinforces the national taken-for-granted.[49] Thus, the mobile, the fragmentary and the familiar – not stored inside museums or visitor centres but dispersed in multiple and nomadic public spaces – turn the civilians into a heroic "army" that unites the nation under its wings and blurs criticism of both communities and the state. As already mentioned, it is the new conditions of appearance of the objects and buildings from below that create a heroic and uniting display which dissolves personal and sectorial voices and calibrates itself with the national history through individuals and their personal loss.

Discussion

War museums serve as important agents of national memory in the modern age. Curatorial practices from above play a major role in shaping the national narrative of war. The reliance of the curation from above on military material culture based on rarefication and generalisation creates museums' ability to exhibit the war event as an "unmediated" affinity with the past in the spirit of the hegemonic national discourse. In contrast, practices of curation and representation from below that are characterised by regular everyday life and civilian objects and testimonies tend to represent personal and fragmentary voices that can serve to contest the national picture of the past.

Unpredictably, and even though they are operated by the state, the initiatives analysed deviate dramatically from the curatorial practices used in war museums from above, as they are populated with most of the damaged objects/buildings that were gathered from civilians' daily routines and their characteristics correspond, in the main, with modes of representation from below. Turning most of the objects/buildings, with no sorting or selection, into an inventory of valuable artefacts contests the museum's tendency to rarify the objects exhibited between its walls; using everyday life objects/buildings undermines the ability to produce a generalised symbolic representation; and gathering solely civilian objects/buildings stands in contrast to the military metanarrative and the bunkers, tanks, airplanes and guns that populate it.

[47] KEREN, Yoav. The Items Collected from within the Ruins at Kibbutz Be'eri, More than 100 of whose Members were Murdered. *Israel Hayom*, accessed 5 May 2026, https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/yokra13747114. [In Hebrew]

[48] ABRAMOV, Eti. "Heritage is Part of Resilience… [In Hebrew]

[49] BILLIG, Michael. *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage Publications, 1995. ISBN: 0803975252.

The mobilisation of objects/buildings and their fragmentary and discontinuous dispersal also deviates from the ways war is typically presented to the public from above. A close look at curatorial and representation practices and at the characteristics of the exhibits reveals a picture that undermines the oft-repeated claim that history from below allows for the surfacing of diverse voices, multiple perspectives and even sociopolitical critique. In other words, the passage from above to below does not represent a passage from the national to the personal or from the heroic to the critical. It seems that, on the contrary, the characteristics of display from below contribute to replicating the military national–heroic consensus. Despite national history from above suffering a drop in its public standing in recent decades, as the Israeli public's opposition to the political stasis has grown, the war seems to have brought it back to life.

The exposure of the personal dimension did not create a community-specific narrative but rather acted to synchronise personal experiences with the national narrative and national time, and to redeem the event from being presented as a sectorial trauma (belonging to the "kibbutzniks", the "leftists" the "traitors"). Refraining from dealing with Israel's social tensions and divided party politics was made possible by placing the personal at the centre. This move can be seen as a tactical apoliticality that prevents the personal from functioning as political, and enables a depoliticisation of war that transcends class differences and ideological partisanship. Using the personal, which refers to every man and woman in Israel, enables the denial of the ethnic, class and political elements that characterise the attacked group and that could have been perceived as divisive. This phenomenon deviates from the trends that characterised the public field of commemoration in Israel before the war, indicating that national memory is no longer a symbolic resource that demarcates the boundaries of all ethnic–class–political groups in Israel. In particular, it suggests that the rift in Israeli society allowed hegemonic groups to develop narratives that are no longer based on traditional national "heroism" but rather on a personal loss and trauma that aligns with global post-national discourse.[50] In contrast to the "traumatic nationalism" notions of significant groups in the Israeli society, the attack on the communities created a narrative of trauma that is displayed as an attack on the Israeli society as a whole and as a national trauma.

The findings raise questions about the possibility of a curatorial action from below that would challenge the consensual picture of the past. The practices employed by the initiatives point to a certain artificiality in the binary distinctions between below/above, personal/national and heroic/critical. They also point to the underlying assumption that a multiplicity of personal voices necessarily embodies a multiplicity of opinions and perspectives and a critique of the conditions that led to the catastrophe and the breakout of the war. In light of this, the ways in which war museums can serve as venues for voices that oppose a "curation of repression" become unclear. A question mark hangs over the ways in which it is possible to enact an autonomy of display against the ideological centralism embodied in solidarity. When practices that strive to democratise display also serve to replicate the taken-for-granted it becomes necessary to re-examine the conditions that enable the presentation of an event outside the boundaries of the consensus. In light of recent events, it may be too early to suggest that post-nationalist tendencies will push war to the back of the collective identity, forcing war museums to deconstruct the patriotic experience and replace it with discourses that seek to

[50] LOMAKY-FEDER, Edana. Competing Models of Nationalism: An Analysis of Memorial Ceremonies in Schools. In: *Nations and Nationalism*, 17(3), 2011, pp. 581–603. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2011.00492.x.

stabilise the conditions that establish political calm.[51] The rise of fundamentalism on the one hand and nationalism on the other forces us to think about war as a continuous current event which repeatedly re-emerges and powerfully unsettles liberal Western democracies. As such, it necessitates thinking anew about the modernist configurations – from above or from below – that have characterised the presentation of war in museums, and about novel ways that might operate outside this equation and broaden the representations of war in the current times.

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