

# War in European Museum Narratives and Cultural Memory

Polina Verbytska

Prof. Dr. Polina Verbytska  
Lviv Polytechnic National University  
Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Department of History, Museology and Cultural Heritage  
3 Mytropolyt Andrei Street  
79013 Lviv  
Ukraine  
e-mail: Polina.V.Verbytska@lpnu.ua  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3123-0768>

*Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, 2023, 11:4:21-43  
doi: 10.46284/mkd.2023.11.4.2

## *War in European Museum Narratives and Cultural Memory*

The article examines how the war narrative is displayed in modern European museum exhibitions, particularly in light of new museology and cultural memory trends in Germany and Poland. The study recognises that the contested nature of cultural and historical contexts influences the process of representing cultural memory in museum narratives. It combines the theoretical approach of museology with specific museum practices. Using case studies from the Bundeswehr Museum of Military History, Dresden, Germany; the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation, Berlin, Germany; and the Museum of the Second World War, Gdansk, Poland, the author examines the impact of challenging issues centred on cultural memory of the war in museum exhibitions over recent decades. The study underlines the significance of innovative approaches to museum exhibitions that display the experience of war and contribute to social dialogue and sustainability.

Keywords: war, museum narrative, permanent exhibition, cultural memory, forced migration

## Introduction

Memories and experiences of war continue to haunt individuals long after the conflict has ended. The interpretation of the history of World War II and the assessment of its significance for Ukraine has links to the country's postcolonial search for national identity and its geopolitical choice between Russia and the West.<sup>1</sup> The construction of Ukrainian historical memory of World War II has been complicated by the inconsistent endorsement of different and contradictory manifestations of memory politics during years of independence.<sup>2</sup>

The war of Putin's regime against Ukraine also affects the perspective on these narratives and how they are dealt with. Complex social and political issues and historical and cultural factors drive the ongoing war in Ukraine. As a result, it has had devastating humanitarian consequences, with countless civilians impacted by violence, forced migration, displacement and other forms of humanitarian crises. Eliciting meaningful ways of communicating cultural

<sup>1</sup> ZHURZHENKO, Tetyana. Chuzha viina chy 'spilna Peremoha'? Natsionalizatsiia pamiati pro Druhu svitovu viinu na ukrainorosiiskomu prykordonni [Foreign war or common victory? Nationalizing the memory of World War II on the Ukrainian-Russian border]. In: *Ukraina Moderna*, Vol. 18, 2011, p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> VERBYTSKA, Polina & KUZMYN, Roman. Between amnesia and the 'war of memories': politics of memory in the museum narratives of Ukraine. In: *Muzeológia a Kultúrne Dedičstvo/Museology and Cultural Heritage*, vol. 7, 2019, Is. 2, pp. 23-34.

memory about the war becomes essential in the present and for working towards a more peaceful future.

In the aftermath of 1989, the representation of cultural memory, particularly regarding the traumatic events of the twentieth century, became a battleground for reconstructing and re-evaluating the past, both in post-communist Eastern Europe and in Western European countries.<sup>3</sup> Maria Mälksoo highlighted four central “mnemonic communities” in the context of the European memory regarding World War II: Atlantic–Western European, German, East–Central European and Russian.<sup>4</sup> Their memories of the war centre around different events: one group focused on D-Day of 1944 and the Allied Victory in Europe on 8 May 1945; they also recalled the manifold traumas resulting from bombing raids and total defeat; another group remembered the trials of undergoing Nazi and Soviet occupations and derived benefits from the expensive triumph in the “Great Patriotic War”.<sup>5</sup>

This perspective provides an opportunity to explore how changes and differences in the political and cultural landscape have influenced museum narratives. By examining the theme of war in museum narratives, it is possible to observe changes to the cultural memory of this historical event. It is particularly relevant for Poland and Germany, where the Second World War remains a crucial reference point in discussions about national identity and historical interpretation following the events of 1989.

This paper examines innovative approaches to presenting war in museum narratives in Germany and Poland, focusing on the challenging issues of cultural memory and its impact on museum exhibitions. The research focuses on selected exhibitions based on innovative museum practices that reflect conceptual changes fostering critical social engagement with the legacies of war. The research is based on the authors’ fieldwork investigating museum exhibitions and communicating with curators in Germany and Poland from November 2022 to April 2023. The research focused on the Bundeswehr Museum of Military History in Dresden; the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation in Berlin; and the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk.

### Innovative approaches in museology that challenge dominant narratives

How we understand and experience historical events substantially affects our perspective on the present and future. It can shape individuals’ values and promote a particular interpretation of history and current affairs.<sup>6</sup>

Especially significant in the context of this paper is an analytical framework developed by Björkdahl et al. to evaluate the impact of memory politics on the quality of peace in societies undergoing a transition from conflict. The researchers focus on the interplay between sites, actors, narratives and events, which they call “mnemonic formations”. These clusters play a

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<sup>3</sup> RADONIC, Ljiljana. Post-communist invocation of Europe: memorial museums’ narratives and the Europeanization of memory. In: *National Identities*, vol. 19, 2017, No. 2, p. 269.

<sup>4</sup> MÄLKSOO, Maria. The memory politics of becoming European: The East European subalterns and the collective memory of Europe. In: *European journal of international relations*, vol. 15, 2009, No. 4, p. 654.

<sup>5</sup> JARAUSCH, Konrad H. & LINDENBERGER, Thomas. Contours of a Critical History of Contemporary Europe: A Transnational Agenda. In: JARAUSCH, Konrad H. & LINDENBERGER, Thomas (eds). *Conflicted Memories: Europeanizing Contemporary Histories*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> WNUK, Rafal & MAJEWSKI, Piotr M. Between Heroization and Martyrology: The Second World War in Selected Museums in Central and Eastern Europe. In: *The Polish Review*, vol. 60, 2015, No. 4, p. 3.

significant role in shaping the politics of memory surrounding a significant issue, phenomenon or event related to the conflict.<sup>7</sup>

According to Rothberg, memories of tragic events are subject to change due to manipulation, oblivion or suppression, as well as various social, psychological and political factors that situate such memories within new contexts. In these contexts, they interact with other cultural representations that occurred not only during the events being remembered but also before and after them.<sup>8</sup>

Macdonald highlights that the defining characteristic of “difficult heritage” is its contested place concerning contemporary identity.<sup>9</sup> Even in exhibitions that are explicitly transnational or comparative, depictions of the Second World War are nearly always associated with the nation-state or, at the very least, with national viewpoints, sources and topics.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, as Thiemeyer argues, modern museum representations focus on individual experiences. They may aim to be less nationalistic, but they still take into consideration the respective national characteristics in museum representation due to the different historical memory and reference frameworks.<sup>11</sup>

Rothberg’s definition of multidirectional memory is relevant to museums which present the war since, if they aim to function on a transnational level, they can establish links and connections between diverse war histories and memories.<sup>12</sup>

The abovementioned considerations stimulate museums to explore new strategies for challenging dominant narratives. One of the main innovative museology approaches is to introduce the anthropological perspective into museum exhibitions, shifting from a narrow focus on military history to a more inclusive representation of universal human experiences of violence and suffering – and not only from the perspective soldiers but also of civilians.<sup>13</sup> Emphasis on the human aspect of war allows visitors to engage with personal testimonies and artefacts and recognises the importance of incorporating oral histories and individual experiences.<sup>14</sup>

Jaeger suggests that the transnational approach in museology embraces diverse perspectives and voices, creating transnational constellations that enable comparisons between regional and national narratives.<sup>15</sup> This strategy prioritises the representation of diverse viewpoints and

<sup>7</sup> BJÖRKDAHL, Annika, BUCKLEY-ZISTEL, Susanne, KAPPLER, Stefanie, SELIMOVIC, Johanna M. & WILLIAMS, Timothy. Memory politics, cultural heritage and peace: Introducing an analytical framework to study mnemonic formations. In: *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2017, No. 1, pp. 1-18.

<sup>8</sup> ROTHBERG, Michael. Beyond Tancred and Clorinda: Trauma studies for implicated subjects. In: BUELENS, Gert, DURRANT, Samuel & EAGLESTONE, Robert (eds). *The future of trauma theory: Contemporary literary and cultural criticism* (pp. xi-xviii), 2013, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> MACDONALD, Sharon. *Difficult heritage: Negotiating the Nazi past in Nuremberg and beyond*. London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 2-5.

<sup>10</sup> ERLI, Astrid. Wars we have seen: Literature as a medium of collective memory in the ‘age of extremes’. In: LAMBERTI, Elena & FORTUNATI, *Vita Memories and Representations of War*. Leiden: Brill, 2009, pp. 41-42.

<sup>11</sup> THIEMEYER, Thomas. *Fortsetzung des Krieges mit anderen Mitteln: Die beiden Weltkriege im Museum*. Leiden: Brill Schöningh, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> ROTHBERG, Michael. *Multidirectional memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the age of decolonization*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> THIEMEYER, Fortsetzung des..., p. 19; JAEGER, Stephan. *The Second World War in the Twenty-First-Century Museum*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> WHITLOCK, Gillian. *Savage: Locating lives in the migration museum*. In: *Life Writing*, vol. 14, 2017, No. 4, pp. 427-440.

<sup>15</sup> JAEGER, *The Second...*, p. 33.

experiences and is based on reflective practice that values transparency and trust within and beyond the museum.<sup>16</sup>

Museum practitioners and researchers are reconsidering museums' role as social and knowledge-based institutions which engage visitors in dialogue regarding contemporary social issues.<sup>17</sup> Sandell argues that museums can contribute to the process of social and political change as moral agents and sites.<sup>18</sup> This approach contributes to restoring peace and facilitating reconciliation in society. The concept of "narratives of transformation" highlights the museums' significance in promoting principles of social impact, shaping a fresh museum model that prioritises dialogue and social sustainability.<sup>19</sup> This requires implementation of a community engagement strategy that encourages visitors to actively reflect and share their experiences of the past within the museum.

### Memory Culture and the Museum Landscape in Germany

In the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the memory reconciliation process of the two halves of Germany involved a critical approach to the Nazi past and an acknowledgment of German responsibility for the crimes committed during the war. This was reflected in the establishment of new museums and memorials, such as the Topography of Terror museum in Berlin, which focuses on the Nazi machinery of terror and repression, and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, which acknowledges the genocide committed against the Jewish people.<sup>20</sup>

New aspects of the memory of the Second World War emerged in German public debate in the twenty-first century. In this context, the curator of the Military Museum in Dresden Dr Gerhard Bauer, noted:

We have to reflect on how the use and the abuse of power and the role of the military, as well as human voices and virtues, are linked and how they were and can be employed under certain circumstances (political or other crises, for instance).<sup>21</sup>

In addition to examining the perpetrators' perspective, attempts began to place the discourse of the victims together with concepts such as "air war" or escape and expulsion at the centre of the collective memory.<sup>22</sup>

Holocaust memorial sites at former concentration camps – Buchenwald, Dachau and Sachsenhausen – have special meanings in cultural memory in Germany. These sites introduced a specific documentary presentation style known as "historical documentation" that uses

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<sup>16</sup> LYNCH, Bernadette. *Reflective debate, radical transparency and trust in the museum*. In: *Museum Management and Curatorship*, vol. 28, 2013, No. 1, pp. 1-13; JAEGER, The Second..., p.34

<sup>17</sup> JANES, Robert R. & SANDELL, Richard. *Museum Activism*. London: Routledge, 2019, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> SANDELL, Richard. *Museums, moralities and human rights*. Taylor & Francis, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> JAEGER, The Second..., p. 34.

<sup>20</sup> THIEMEYER, Thomas. *Polyphonic and close to the person. How German museums recall the Second World War today*. In: KALAZNY, Jerzy, KORZENIEWSKA, Amelia & KORZENIEWSKI, Bartosz (eds.). *Druga wojna światowa w pamięci kulturowej w Polsce i w Niemczech: 70 lat później (1945-2015)*. Gdańsk: Muzeum II Wojny Światowej, 2015, pp. 81-105.

<sup>21</sup> BAUER, Gerhard. 'Interview in framework of the research project: Cultural Heritage in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies.' By VERBYTSKA, Polina. MHM Abteilung Museumsbetrieb/BMVg/BUND/DE. March 28, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p.97.

objects as sources to enable them to function as witnesses.<sup>23</sup> This approach has influenced various historical museums in Germany and was successfully implemented in the new permanent exhibition opened in the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, and Reconciliation in Berlin in 2021.

The expulsion of Germans within the context of National Socialist rule and warfare was a subject of intense public and scientific attention. Consequently, numerous discussions arose regarding the focus of the Documentation Centre. The conceptual framework and the core aspects of the exhibition concept were developed by an academic advisory council in partnership with the Foundation for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation, and Atelier Brückner design office in 2016.<sup>24</sup> The Foundation's director and historian, Gundula Bavendamm, explained the concept of the Centre:

Following the Foundation's mission, we contextualise the Flight and Expulsion of the Germans in the European context. Therefore, we open up a broader panorama and outline a European history of forced migration. The Germans are one example among others.<sup>25</sup>

### Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation

The permanent exhibition is structured thematically and chronologically, spanning two floors and three sections. The first section focuses on the European perspective of forced migration, specifically during the twentieth century, while the second section contextualises it within the framework of World War II and Nazi policies of expansion, occupation and extermination.<sup>26</sup>

Aside from the exhibition's focus on the expulsion and displacement of Germans, it also includes the direct relationship with other expulsions, presenting in particular the extensive displacements in Eastern Central Europe from 1944 to 1948. However, this paper focuses on the most distinguishing characteristics of the exhibition section on "The Century of Refugees – Forced Migration in Europe" regarding new museology trends.

This exhibition is organised around thematic islands and presents a comprehensive overview of the causes, processes and consequences of forced migration from twentieth-century Europe up to the present day. Particular attention is given to documentation sources that explore issues related to terminology and discourse, such as the meanings of nation and nationalism, force and violence, and the experience of transitory camps.<sup>27</sup> It is worth mentioning that the exhibition delves into the role of international law in mitigating and penalising expulsion. The exhibition conveys its main messages through various exhibits such as photographs, testimonials and interviews with contemporary witnesses linked to refugees' experiences. It encourages visitors to think critically and engage with the topics' controversies.

<sup>23</sup> THIEMEYER, Thomas. *Work, specimen, witness: How different perspectives on museum objects alter the way they are perceived and the values attributed to them*. In: *Museum and Society*, 13(3), 2015, p. 405.

<sup>24</sup> BAVENDAMM, Gundula, FRÖHLICH, Uta, KAMP, Andrea, MOLL, Andrea, WENSCH, Johanna & ZIEMER, Daniel. *Konzept für die Dauerausstellung*. Berlin: Stiftung Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> EGLAU, Victoria. *Der schwierige Umgang mit einem Trauma der Deutschen. [The Difficulty of Dealing with a Trauma of the Germans. Center Flight and Expulsion]*, Zentrum Flucht und Vertreibung <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/zentrum-flucht-und-vertreibung-der-schwierige-umgang-mit-100.html>, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> BAVENDAMM, Konzept für..., p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 11.

The exhibition section on “Terminology and Controversy” explains the specific terms used throughout the display, such as expulsion, deportation, forcible resettlement, population exchange, evacuation, flight, ethnic cleansing and transfers. The exhibition makes a clear differentiation between ethnic cleansing and genocide, with the latter involving the intentional and organised extermination of groups based on their ethnicity, race, nationality or religion.<sup>28</sup> The overview installation highlights this differentiation through the portrayal of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust as examples.

Through case studies from different periods, the thematic island “Nation and Nationalism” explores this phenomenon, examining the context and manifestations of nationalism and the dynamics that have led to the marginalisation, expulsion and extermination of certain groups.<sup>29</sup> The case studies include the suspicion and deportation of citizens believed to be agents of foreign powers during World War I, the nationalism and propaganda of the Nazi regime and the nationalist historical politics during the Balkan wars of the 1990s. Finally, the thematic island addresses the opinions and perspectives of visitors.

The exhibition’s thematic island, “Force and Violence” focuses on the violent nature of flight, expulsion and forced resettlement and its impact on those affected. The exhibition



**Fig. 1:** The thematic island “Nation and Nationalism” at the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation. Photo by P. Verbytska.

showcases various contemporary witness accounts from different historical contexts to illustrate the various forms of violence. In particular, this exhibition section emphasises the asymmetry between the people perpetrating the violence and the victims.

Refugee camps have become a symbol of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ traumatic history. The exhibition’s “Transit and Temporary Camps” section provides a historical and thematic overview of camps established for

expellees and refugees, including internment, deportation, reception and transit camps.<sup>30</sup> It examines this phenomenon from various angles, providing insight into the experiences of those living in the camps and their challenges.

Displacement and expulsion represent major turning points in people’s lives. In the subsection on “Loss and New Beginning” visitors can hear stories told by nine figures that present the real experiences of people with refugee backgrounds in today’s Germany. Some were expelled from their homes in Central and Eastern Europe as ethnic Germans after 1945. Others fled

<sup>28</sup> BAVENDAMM, Konzept für..., p.14.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p.15.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p.15.

South Vietnam as boat people from 1979 onwards, or arrived as war refugees from the former Yugoslavia after 1991. Their reflections were recorded in a Berlin film studio and are presented interactively in the exhibition.

The “International law and human rights” thematic island emphasises the importance of international law in countering state violence and the interplay between political, moral and legal norms. This section raises essential questions about law and accountability, especially in modern wars and conflicts. It explores how expulsions can be prevented today, how people’s perceptions of justice and humanity had evolved by the end of the twentieth century, and the relationship between individual rights and collective rights in the in the current century and the last.<sup>31</sup> Visitors can find additional sources in the Library and Testimony Archive’s collection at the Centre,<sup>32</sup> which covers Germans’ and other nations’ forced migration experiences in Europe and the world.

In the foyer on the first floor, the vast space housing the spacious introductory section of the exhibition “The Century of Refugees – Forced Migration in Europe” is also used to communicate with visitors. When I visited the museum in November 2022, visitors were being encouraged to share their opinions concerning solidarity with Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees during the war.

### The Bundeswehr Military History Museum, Dresden

The Federal German Army Museum of Military History has, since 1990, been Germany’s national museum of military history, run and funded by the Federal Ministry of Defence.<sup>33</sup> The Military and Historical Museum’s new permanent exhibition concept, developed in 2011, focused on the cultural history and “the anthropological side of violence regarding war as one of the forms of violence”.<sup>34</sup> Defining the museum’s mission, its curator Gerhard Bauer stated:

Our mission is to tell the history of German armed forces from the Middle Ages to our times in an international context, thereby constantly examining and analysing how humanity performed regarding power and violence. The use of force that exerts it and who suffers from it is not just limited to the military but common to humanity.<sup>35</sup>

The old building and the new extension of the Museum of Military History offer visitors two different approaches to military history.

To be able to offer views on history/military history from different angles, we have two museums within one. There is an exhibition which is chronologically ordered, encompassing all periods between the Middle Ages and the twenty-first century, and then there is a parcours confined to Daniel Libeskind’s modern building treating topics like

<sup>31</sup> BAVENDAMM, Konzept für..., p.16.

<sup>32</sup> Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation. *Konzept für Bibliothek & Zeitzeugenarchiv*. Berlin, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> BAUER, *Interview in...*

<sup>34</sup> PIEKEN, Gorch. Contents and Space: New Concept and New Building of the Militärhistorisches Museum of the Bundeswehr. In: *Museum and society*, vol. 10, 2012, No. 3, pp. 163-173.

<sup>35</sup> BAUER, *Interview in...*

“War and Memory”, “Politics and the Use of Force” or “The Military and Technical Progress”.<sup>36</sup>



**Fig. 2:** The “Transit and Temporary Camps” section of the exhibition at the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation. Photo by P. Verbytska.

The vertical structure within the extension provides a new context for thematic exhibitions, providing visitors with a deeper understanding of meaning, experience and historical phenomena.

A transnational approach and the principle of presenting multiple perspectives underpin the design of the permanent exhibition. As Bauer noted:

The geographic position of Germany always ensured that German states never could and would act entirely on their own. German issues all too often became international issues. So, our topics must be regarded from at least two sides. This applies to military operations, civilians’ wartime experiences, minorities, or gender issues. War and violence in all their shapes and their consequences, such as displacements or “ethnic cleansing”, are represented as everyday experiences, not just as purely national ones.<sup>37</sup>

The thematic section of the permanent exhibition, “Dresden View”, is an example of the presentation of the memory discourse of “victims” on the topic of “air war” drawing on new concepts in museology. In particular, it focuses on the destruction of Dresden and

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>37</sup> BAUER, *Interview in...*



two other European cities, Wielun and Rotterdam, during the Second World War.<sup>38</sup> The new extension forms a symbolic link with Dresden and its destruction in the Second World War in



**Fig. 3:** *The Library and Testimony Archive at the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation.* Photo by P. Verbytska.

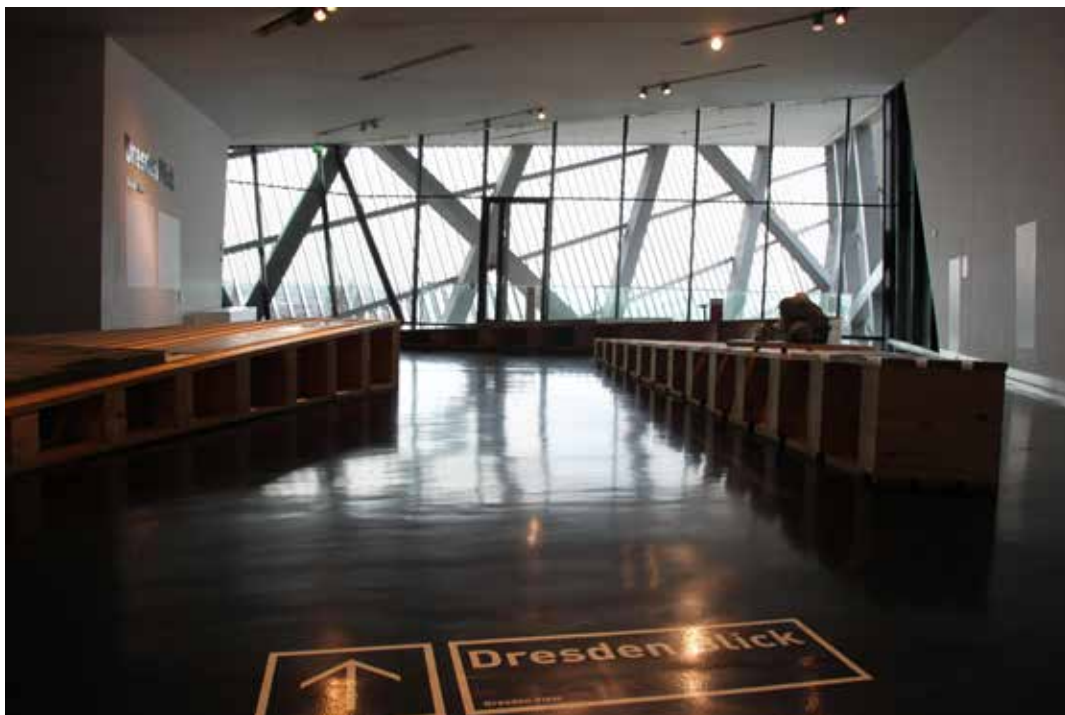


**Fig. 4:** *Space for communication with visitors in the foyer on the first floor at the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation.* Photo by P. Verbytska.

<sup>38</sup> PIEKEN, *The Bundeswehr...*, p. 55.



**Fig. 5:** *The old building and the new architectural extension of the Bundeswehr Museum of Military History, Dresden. Photo by P. Verbytska.*



**Fig. 6:** *The thematic exhibition "Dresden View", Bundeswehr Museum of Military History, Dresden. Photo by P. Verbytska.*

February 1945. With an acute angle of 40.1 degrees, the wedge-shaped museum extension has the same shape as the destroyed area of the city.<sup>39</sup>



**Fig. 7:** Paving stones from the town of Wielun in Poland devastated by the German attack on 1 September 1939. Photo by P. Verbytska.

The exhibition starts with paving stones originating from the town of Wielun in Poland, which was devastated by the German attacks early on the morning of 1 September 1939. This attack by the Wehrmacht marked the beginning of World War II.

From one side, the terrace within the exhibition area at the wedge offers visitors a tremendous panoramic view of the modern Dresden. On the other side, visitors can examine a picture of Dresden taken from a German reconnaissance plane on 15 February 1945, showing the city's historical centre lying in ruins. Pavement slabs from Dresden's Johannstadt district which were struck by four incendiary bombs are embedded in the floor in front of the glass facade.

According to Dr Gerhard Bauer, a multi-perspective approach is one of the main principles of the exhibition:

In some sections of the exhibition, we quote personal accounts of two people having experienced the same event but being of different ages, standing on opposing sides, or coming from different social backgrounds.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> PIEKEN, Gorch & ROGG, Matthias. *The Bundeswehr Museum of Military History: Exhibition guide*. Dresden: Sandstein Kommunikation 2012, p. 19.

<sup>40</sup> BAUER, *Interview in...*

The biographies and varied life experiences of Dresden's residents affected by these dramatic events are presented in this exhibition section. For example, it tells the story of a nine-year-old German boy called Manfred Pucks lost his whole family the night bombing raids on Dresden. It also presents the life of a Jewish girl, Henny Wolf, who was saved from the city's destruction as she had been deported that day to a concentration camp. After the war, Henny visited schools as a contemporary witness to discuss her wartime experiences.

The exhibition also features exhibits such as a photograph of Rotterdam, Netherlands, following its destruction in 1941, and fragments of the Orphan Girl sculpture created by Dutch sculptor Johannes de Graef in 1763 for the Rotterdam orphanage. The German Air Force's bombing of Rotterdam on 14 May 1940, destroyed the orphanage and the entire city



**Fig. 8:** *Fragments of the Orphan Girl sculpture from Rotterdam, Netherlands.* Photo by P. Verbytska.

centre. This section of the exhibition displays the biography of firefighter Jaap Timmers. The attack had a profound impact on his life, resulting in the loss of his younger brother and the destruction of his hometown. As a result, he refrained from speaking German and avoided traveling to nearby Germany for the remainder of his life.<sup>41</sup>

### Polish memory narrative controversies

After 1989 a reconceptualisation of the Polish memory of the war started to emphasise the heroism and sacrifice of the Polish people in the face of Nazi terror and Soviet aggression. Rather than hosting collections of historical artefacts, Polish museums began to function as “mediums for popularising history”.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> PIEKEN, *The Bundeswehr...*, p. 192.

<sup>42</sup> WNUK & MAJEWSKI, *Between Heroization...*, p. 4.

The establishment of new museums in Poland is government-supported and influenced by politicians. The Museum of the Second World War vividly illustrates the struggle over interpreting Polish history in political and historical discourse. In particular, right-wing politicians, including the Law and Justice Party leaders, criticised the museum's concept developed by the team under the leadership of former director and famous historian Pawel Machcewicz, arguing that the exhibition focused too much on people's suffering and minimised Polish heroism. This phenomenon, described as a "Poland-centric perception" by Miroslav Karwat,<sup>43</sup> seeks to persuade others that Poland played the more significant role and that "Polish conditions were the most worthy of memorising universally".<sup>44</sup>

The battle over the interpretation of Polish history in the museum embodies conflicting perspectives.<sup>45</sup> As Pawel Machcewicz noted in the interview, this controversy became one of the most public issues in Poland, having a significant impact on what people think about history:

We managed to create an alternative approach to history to this prevalent approach promoted by the government. More than 300,000 people visited the museum in the first six months after it opened.<sup>46</sup>

### Museum of the Second World War, Gdansk, Poland

This leading exhibition aims to show Europe and the world the wartime experiences of Poles and other nations of Central and Eastern Europe. These experiences were, in many respects, different from those of Western Europeans. The exhibition also emphasises that Poland fell victim to two sets of aggressors/ occupiers and that the effects of the Second



**Fig. 9:** *Museum of the Second World War, Gdansk, Poland.*  
Photo by P. Verbytska.

<sup>43</sup> KARWAT, Miroslav. W oparach polonocentryzmu. In: KOWALSKI, Piotr (ed). *Polacy o sobie. Współczesna autoreleksja: jednostka, społeczeństwo, historia*. Łomża: Stopka, 2005, p. 404.

<sup>44</sup> WAWRZYŃSKI, Patryk. The Usage of Politics of Memory in Polish Foreign Policy: Present State and Perspectives. In: *Copernicus Journal of Political Studies*, 2012, No. 1, p. 68.

<sup>45</sup> SANDER, Martin. Hero worship at all costs? The dispute over the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk. In: *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire. Revue pluridisciplinaire de la Fondation Auschwitz*, vol. 126, 2018, p. 124.

<sup>46</sup> ETGES, Andreas, ZÜNDORF, Irmgard & MACHCEWICZ, Pawel. History and politics and the politics of history: Poland and its museums of contemporary history. In: *International Public History*, vol. 1, 2018, No. 1, p. 6.

World War defined the course of Polish and European history until 1989.<sup>47</sup> The museum's building is divided into three zones reflecting the relationship between past, present and future. The past is presented underground, the present in the square around the building, and future in the tower, a dominant modern feature. Its above-ground part is shaped like a sloping prism with a triangular base.

The permanent exhibition combines a chronological and theme-based layout: the tour leads from a section on the origins of the war, through the sections showing the successive phases of the conflict, to its conclusion and a narrative devoted to its consequences. This is reflected in the division of the exhibition into three main blocks: "The Road to War", "The Horror of War" and "The Long Shadow of War".<sup>48</sup> Museum curator Zambrzycki underlined in the interview the unique mission of the museum in the context of European cultural memory:

The Second World War Museum in Gdańsk is an institution that talks about the universal experience of war. We talk about war because – like all our society – we want to live in peace. In the leading exhibition, we show many phenomena that do not fit into mainstream narratives or are marginalised because they occur on the periphery. Here, we can mention the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, the phenomenon of the Polish Underground State, or the Central European uprisings: the two Warsaw uprisings, as well as those in Prague and Slovakia. Hence, the exhibition is essential for Poland and the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe. The leading exhibition is a warning, a kind of memento.<sup>49</sup>

The permanent exhibition showcases the course and character of the conflict by highlighting the individual experiences of diverse nationalities and regions of Europe – not just famous personalities but

[t]he lives of civilians and ordinary soldiers, the silent heroes of the war who had to endure occupation terror, bombing, starvation, and displacement. The Museum of the Second World War phenomenon lies precisely in this: in showing the everyday life of ordinary people – like most of us.<sup>50</sup>

The most controversial element of the museum narrative regarding West and East European cultures of memory is the correlation between Nazism, communism, and the origins of Soviet totalitarianism. This theme passes through different parts of the exhibition. The exhibition consists of original artefacts, reconstructions, iconographic materials, sound and film recordings, and multimedia installations to evoke emotions from visitors. Immersive aspects of the permanent exhibition implemented throughout the museum create an engaging visitor experience. The visual layout of the permanent exhibition highlights the main messages and impacts visitors' perception at the emotional level.

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<sup>47</sup> WNUK, Rafał, MACHCEWICZ, Paweł, GALKA-OLEJKO, Oliwia, JASINSKI, Łukasz & DANILUK, Jan. *Muzeum II Wojny Światowej: katalog wystawy głównej*. Gdańsk: Muzeum II Wojny Światowej, 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>49</sup> ZAMBRZYCKI, Marek. 'Interview in framework of the research project: Cultural Heritage in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies.' By VERBYTSKA, Polina. Curator/chief exhibition Officer of the Exhibition Department of the World War II Museum in Gdańsk, March 7, 2023.

<sup>50</sup> ZAMBRZYCKI, Marek. 'Interview in framework...

For instance, in the first section of the permanent exhibition, “The Birth and Expansion of Totalitarianism”, the main thread of the narrative is devoted to the forces striving to overthrow the existing order: Nazism, fascism, communism and Japanese imperialism. This axis shows totalitarian movements and systems as factors brutalising European politics and consciousness, thus paving the way to World War II and then leading it consciously in a criminal direction, in violation of international law and demonstrating complete contempt for human beings.<sup>51</sup>

The exhibition highlights the contrast between the idealised depiction of the world presented by the official propaganda of the three European totalitarian regimes and the harsh realities of repression, ruthless rule, collectivisation and the Great Famine of the 1930s in Ukraine. This contrast aims to reveal the darker sides of totalitarian regimes and their impact on society. Additionally, the exhibition explains the role of totalitarian ideologies in instigating the Second World War. The exhibition presents the Soviet Union as a communist state of mass terror. This narrative is illustrated by exhibits in the form of an original hand-mill from a village in Ukraine; a Nagan revolver – part of the equipment of the Red Army and Soviet security organs in



**Fig. 10:** Corridor to the section on “Collusion between Hitler and Stalin” at the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk, Poland. Photo by P. Verbytska.

the interwar period, and thus symbolising terror; and sculptures of Lenin and Stalin documenting the cult of the individual.

Visitors traverse a narrow corridor lined with historical flags to access the exhibit on the “Collusion between Hitler and Stalin”. On one side, Nazi flags adorned with the swastika are displayed, while on the opposite side, red flags symbolising the USSR with the hammer and sickle accompany the path. These flags include original standards from both nations, carefully secured within frames. A significant point of this section involves the presentation of replicas showcasing the secret agreement between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union, signed on 23 August 1939. The documents are showcased in German and Russian languages, featuring the signatures of Ribbentrop and Molotov.

The narrative of the exhibition section called “Attack from the East” concerns the Soviet aggression against Poland and its immediate consequences. It is represented by a massive curtain of vertical stripes separating the space, on which a film is projected showing the Red Army entering the territory of the Republic of Poland and imposing the Stalinist regime. On the other side of this curtain, symbolising the severing of the

<sup>51</sup> *Museum of the Second World War: Regulamin konkursu na opracowanie projektu ekspozycji Muzeum II Wojny Światowej*, accessed April 20, 2023, <https://docplayer.pl/18292848-Regulamin-konkursu-na-opracowanie-projektu-ekspozycji-muzeum-ii-wojny-swiatowej.html>.

eastern part of Poland seized by the invaders, visitors encounter a number of objects: a document describing the persecution of Polishness by the Soviets and the cooperation with the occupier by some national minorities in the territories seized by the USSR; the banner of the Polish 6th Heavy Artillery Regiment, which hid in September 1939 in Lviv, which was later transported to the Recovered Territories in 1945; a propaganda poster from the Soviet daily *Pravda*; and a photograph of Red Army troops knocking over Polish border markers in September 1939. One interesting object is a border marker in the form of a stone tablet from the Polish–Soviet frontier (1921–1939) on the river Zbrucz in 2008. The Zbrucz ran along part of the pre-war Polish–Soviet border. In the autumn of 1939, the new Soviet administration purged the lands it occupied of the Polish state and national symbols. Some of the border tablets were thrown into the Zbrucz.

The central element of the narrative design of the section on the “Partition of Poland” is a table with a red line and the names of cities on both sides of the border. The table corresponds to a simplified map separated by a graphically emphasised demarcation line symbolising the partition of Poland by both invaders. A video showing a joint parade of the Red Army and the Wehrmacht and photographs showing the demarcation of the German–Soviet border, as well as two exhibits – a fragment of barbed wire and a Polish border board with an eagle which the invaders threw into the Zbrucz River after 17 September 1939 – bear similar messages from the new border.

The space dedicated to “Annexation of countries in Central and Eastern Europe, 1939–1940” consists of two parts. The first refers to the design of the so-called red corners, quasi-religious propaganda performances created in virtually every public institution and workplace under Soviet occupation. Objects exhibited in this section illustrate the totalitarian regime policy implemented in places annexed to the Soviet Union in 1939 and 1940, including territories from Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as two regions of Romania (Bessarabia and Bukovina), demonstrating the reign of terror against leadership elites and “class enemies”, mass deportations and ubiquitous communist propaganda. For example, there is a 1941 communist



**Fig. 11:** Section on “Holocaust” at the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk, Poland. Photo by P. Verbytska.



propaganda poster aimed at Latvians stating that “Everyone must vote on January 12 1941 to elect the proletariat’s best representatives”; a Soviet propaganda poster featuring Stalin which glorifies Soviet military power; photos of the exhumation of bodies of Estonian victims of Soviet occupation in Troi Forest on the outskirts of Tallinn, 1941; and documents detailing investigations by the Soviet secret service (1939–1940).

The design of the section devoted to the terror of occupation regimes opens with a monumental inscription “TERROR”. Visitors must walk between these letters to access the room, which displays a cattle car for a train that was used during the war to transport people. The Soviet regime used such wagons to deport Polish citizens and its own people to gulags in the east, while the Germans used them to transport people displaced from lands incorporated into the Reich, including forced labourers, prisoners sent to concentration camps, and Jews to sent to extermination centres. This space is the starting point for exploring the subsequent



**Fig. 12:** Section on “Terror” at the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk, Poland. Photo by P. Verbytska.

spaces of the sections on “Terror” and “Holocaust”. The section illustrates how repression was an integral part of occupation in all conquered countries – the differences lay only in the type and scale.<sup>52</sup>

Under the exhibition’s transnational approach, the phenomena and events of the war are reflected through regional, national, European and global prisms. In particular, the exhibition

<sup>52</sup> Museum of the Second World War..., p.105.

emphasises that World War II began in Gdańsk and that the city was one of the reasons for its outbreak.

The section entitled “After the War” displays a demolished street scene featuring a Soviet T-34 tank amidst the rubble. It symbolises the Red Army’s liberation of Poland from German occupation but also serves as a reminder of the Soviet’s subsequent domination in Poland and other Eastern European countries. Display cases throughout the scene illustrate the scale of the losses during the war, with particular attention to the dead, representing a panorama of



**Fig. 13:** Section entitled “After the war” at the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, Poland. Photo by P. Verbytska

different countries of Europe and the world. This section shows that World War II claimed tens of millions of lives and reduced much of Europe and Asia to rubble.

### Discussion

Regarding the consequences of analysis, the museum exhibitions not only display innovative trends but also demonstrate the impact of cultural memory on their narratives. Museums are not neutral when it comes to the established social and political constructs; indeed, they continue to maintain them<sup>53</sup> and their narratives result from the “authorised heritage discourse”.<sup>54</sup>

In exhibitions about the Second World War, a noticeable conflict exists between national histories and identities versus global or universal perspectives, evident in almost all countries.<sup>55</sup> Considering the political constellations in which the museum exhibitions analysed here were developed, it is unsurprising that the tension between national, regional

and global perspectives on history and European cultural memory challenges the contemporary museum landscape. This tendency is particularly significant for Poland and Germany, where the Second World War remains a critical touchstone in discussions regarding national identity and historical interpretation following 1989. From this perspective, the most contentious aspects of the museum narrative on the culture of memory in West and East Europe pertain to the connection made between Nazism and communism and the characterisation of the Soviet totalitarian regime.

The exhibition at the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk vividly represents the Eastern European perspective in commemorating the war. At the same time, in the last decade, the museum has become a site of conflict between politicians and historians due to the challenge of balancing national identity and a global perspective on history in the exhibition.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that some changes were introduced to the permanent exhibition at the Museum of the Second World War in response to criticisms from right-

<sup>53</sup> HODSDON, Laura. Visitors’ discursive responses to hegemonic and alternative museum narratives: a case study of Le Modèle Noir. In: *Critical Discourse Studies*, vol. 19, 2022, No. 4, p. 402.

<sup>54</sup> SMITH, Laurajane. *Uses of heritage*. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2006, p. 29.

<sup>55</sup> JAEGER, *The Second...*, p.17.

wing politicians in October 2017. One of the modifications involved removing videos and photographs from the last section of the exhibition. The original film depicted wars, conflicts, and violence after World War II, including scenes from the war in Syria, the conflict in Ukraine, and refugees fleeing these conflict zones. These scenes were no longer available for public viewing. Instead, a four-minute cartoon animation called “Unconquered”, produced by the Institute of National Remembrance, was shown in its place.<sup>56</sup> The animation resembles a computer game and portrays Poland’s heroic struggle for independence from 1939 to 1989.

In this context, the responsibility of museum exhibition curators has increased significantly in recent years, due to the interference of memory politics in museum practice. This raises a number of questions concerning the legal protection of exhibition concepts and their authors’ rights.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusions

Despite Poland’s and Germany’s different historical experiences and memory cultures, their museum landscapes share common approaches and practices that employ innovative ways of narrating the Second World War in permanent exhibitions. There has been a gradual change as museums strive to transcend national boundaries and escape the previously dominant national narratives of victimhood and perpetration towards a more complex and multifaceted approach to remembering the war.

Despite political influence on cultural institutions introducing new museological trends into museum practice, the memory of the Second World War is gradually being shaped by a broader spectrum of voices and perspectives. This provides an opportunity for a more diverse and multifaceted narration of the war, including a more varied range of historical, social and cultural perspectives. It also recognises museums’ assets to serve as effective cultural media for a peaceful future, fostering democratic social transformation.

The representation of war in Berlin’s Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation is an example of the integration of pluralistic perspectives into an exhibition narrative of forced migration from the twentieth century to the present. The museum exhibition is based on historical research and oral testimonies, acknowledging its significant role as a bearer of cultural memory.<sup>58</sup> In the exhibition, particular attention is given to documentation sources that explore issues related to terminology and discourse. The Bundeswehr Military History Museum in Dresden’s new permanent exhibition focuses on the cultural history and the anthropological side of the violence of war in the context of the memory discourse and new museological concepts. The narrative presented at the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk emphasises a transnational approach to displaying the events and occurrences that unfolded during the war in Poland and throughout Europe and the world, while representing an Eastern European perspective on those events.

The most distinguishing features concern the new museological approaches implemented in these exhibitions: anthropologising the exhibition narrative; presenting the experience of violence and suffering; refusing follow the traditional model of heroes and victims; integrating

<sup>56</sup> ETGES, ZÜNDORF & MACHCEWICZ, *History and...*, p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> JAGIELSKA-BURDUK, Alicja & JAKUBOWSKI, Andrzej. ‘Narrative Museums’ and Curators’ Rights: The Protection of a Museum Exhibition and Its Scenario under Polish Law. In: *Santander Art and Culture Law Review*, vol. 6, 2020, No. 2, p. 171.

<sup>58</sup> ASSMANN, Aleida. *Geschichte im Gedächtnis: Von der individuellen Erfahrung zur öffentlichen Inszenierung*, Vol. 6. Munich: CH Beck, 2007, p. 154.

multiple narratives and pluralistic perspectives; balancing national, regional, and transnational perspectives; introducing new themes (occupation, persecution, forced migration); and addressing present-day issues and challenges.

Based on personal communication with museum curators, it is worth underlining museums' role in engaging with contemporary social and political issues, such as military conflict, violence, forced migration and human rights. As cultural institutions, these museums have addressed the ongoing wars in Syria and Ukraine and presented them meaningfully and engagingly. By providing visitors with a deeper understanding of these conflicts, museums play a crucial role in promoting empathy and awareness.

The narratives they present employ immersive spaces, interactive displays and personal testimonies, encouraging visitors to reflect critically on the circumstances of war and the implications for contemporary society.

The museums introduced changes in how visitors communicate with the presented stories and created opportunities to transform people's experiences, encouraging critical narrative analysis. Such goals can be achieved through engaging visitors with the exhibition on both a cognitive and an emotional level, using a model of communication that enables the visitors to exchange ideas and information, facilitating communication between members of the public, and organising the community engagement activities within and beyond the exhibition space. Another key approach is to focus on youth, teaching them to solve problems by looking for non-violent solutions.

Integrating new museological approaches into their permanent exhibitions has effectively revitalised these museums, establishing an environment for communication, learning and conversation on the theme of the past and contemporary armed conflicts. International experience of new museological practice in war museums in Europe is crucial in the case of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Finding meaningful ways to commemorate and communicate the legacy of war through museum exhibitions contributes towards a peaceful future. Such efforts provide support to societies affected by war.

## Acknowledgements

I express my gratitude to colleagues in Collegium Carolinum, Munich, Germany, and particularly to Prof. Dr Martin Schulze Wessel for supporting my research and discussion that enriched it. I am grateful to the Volkswagen Foundation for financial support for the scholarship. I sincerely thank the staff of the Bundeswehr Military History Museum, Dresden; Second World War Museum, Gdansk; and the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation, Berlin, and particularly Dr Gerhard Bauer, Marec Zambrzycki and Jörg Schlösser for their assistance.

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