

War, Dialogue, and Overcoming the Past

The Second World War Museum in Gdańsk, Poland

Anna Muller and Daniel Logemann

The tragedy of the Second World War and postwar period is a key event in Polish history and memory. The loss of human life was tremendous—about 5.5 million Polish inhabitants were killed, among them 3 million Jews. The war heavily destroyed Polish infrastructure in both cities and the countryside. Polish borders were shifted several hundred kilometers to the west. The social and political disruption of the war and the forced integration into the Soviet sphere of influence that followed left deep scars and a sense of victimhood. Therefore, it is not surprising that this history—its various interpretations and the modes of its commemoration—is the most contentious aspect of Polish historical identity.

Several historical museums dealing with the Second World War, such as the Warsaw Rising Museum and the Katyń Museum, have emerged in Poland in the last decade. Speaking to a clearly defined audience of eyewitnesses, combatants, families of victims, and youth, the Warsaw Rising Museum and Katyń Museum seek to inspire with the images and stories of a brave and heroic fighting Poland.¹ Both museums concentrate more on the politics of identity and martyrdom of Polish society than on educating visitors through open debate about the past. This celebratory approach to certain aspects of the historical past resembles “commemorative history” rather than an attempt to commemorate history in order to reflect upon it.² Both museums are saturated with an interpretation of the past that proposes a rigid understanding of one’s ethnic, national, and even local community’s place in space and time. Both provide answers rather than create places of reflection, let alone tools to initiate dialogue, on the meaning(s) of wars in general and the Second World War in particular, for Poland and Europe. The Second World

¹ The Warsaw Rising Museum, <http://www.1944.pl/en>; and Katyń Museum, <http://www.muzeumkatynskie.pl/>.

² Timothy Snyder, “Commemorative Causality,” *Eurozine*, June 6, 2013, <http://www.eurozine.com/commemorative-causality/>.

War Museum that opened in Gdańsk, Poland, in March 2017, challenges the tendency that permeates previously established institutions while suggesting that museums can participate in the formation of new models of citizenship by inviting active reflection upon the past.

The Site

In 2007, when then prime minister Donald Tusk called for the creation of a museum devoted to the Second World War, the time felt politically and symbolically ripe. The Second World War, the Cold War, and the Communist regime all had ended and Polish society seemed ready for reflection, perhaps even ready for a historical debate on the nature of its past. Additionally, after an efficacious accession to the European Union, Poland was becoming a place where the rift between western and eastern Europe could be bridged. The future museum appeared to be a reminder of past divisions and a symbol of successful movement beyond these divisions.

The location for the museum seemed fitting as well. Gdańsk—the city where in September 1939 the war began—on the outskirts of Europe, was situated between the two aggressors of the Second World War: Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Gdańsk symbolizes prewar and postwar geopolitical, social, and demographic changes. Following the First World War, Gdańsk was declared a Free City, part of neither Germany nor Poland, under the administration of the League of Nations. While Germans claimed it to be German, Poles saw it as part of eighteenth-century and pre-partitioned Poland. Though in 1939 only around 4 percent of the population of the Free City was Polish, in 1945 the city became a symbol of the victorious war, the Soviet triumphal liberation of this part of Europe from the Nazis, and Poland's recovery of its former territories, to which Poles from eastern Poland flocked. And finally, it is the birthplace of Solidarity, the movement that in the 1980s initiated peaceful changes that led to the dismantling of Communism and overcoming of the divisions that resulted from the war and the Cold War. Hopes for a better today and future can start here, because this is where the past was overcome. Symbolically, the city spans the past and present, and the opening of the museum created a space for dialogue about the future of European politics of history.

Aims and Sources of a Narrative Museum

With this context in mind, it is not surprising that the museum aims to be more than a space that presents the major moments of the Second World War. From its very inception, it was supposed to be a narrative museum; a museum-theatre where select historical actors, artifacts, and other sources form the framework for different dimensions of the message that the museum conveys: the war was the worst catastrophe in humanity, affecting nations, societies, and individuals of



A reconstructed prewar Polish street. (Photo by Andrzej Hoja)

different ethnicities, classes, and genders and forcing many to make impossible choices.³

The narration evolves from the objects, which, contextualized with the historical details and the stories provided by the donors, create a microhistory dimension of the museum. As of 2016, the museum had at its disposal over forty thousand historical artifacts. The abundance of artifacts resulted from a nationwide search that took place between 2011 and 2014. Thirteen thousand of these items were donated. The search invited those who experienced the war or knew the war from various family stories to share what they held dear to them: family memorabilia, documents, artifacts, etc. This pluralistic view of the past complicates a one-sided reading. Finally, the decision to connect a historical object with its—often very individualized—context balances the presence of many other layers of information in the museum, such as scenography or multimedia. The result is at times striking: in this modern museum, where many technically sophisticated solutions are in use, it is the presence of displays with artifacts that dominates the space.

³ About narrative museums and museums-theatres, see: Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Rising from the Rubble: Creating the Museum of the History of Polish Jews,” in *Performance Studies in Motion: International Perspectives and Practices in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Atay Citron, Sharon Aronson-Lehavi, and David Zerbib (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “A Theatre of History: Twelve Principles,” *Drama Review* 59, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 49–59.



The museum's tower, the only part of the museum above ground. (Photo by Andrzej Hoja)

Space, Scope, and Scenography

The story that the museum tells begins with the building. The main building is located underground while only a leaning tower, half red brick and half glass, extends above ground. Visitors begin the tour by descending underground, where the main exhibition is located. Perhaps only retrospectively can one reflect on the meaning of the tower that dominates the visible part of the museum. Its glass structure symbolizes the life that won over death, the light of peace that won over the darkness of war, and finally the modern present and future that dominates over the difficult past. It is not without purpose that upon entering the top of the tower, visitors can view the rebuilt old town of Gdańsk, which was destroyed in the last days of the war.

It is fully underground where visitors encounter the curators' vision of the Second World War. The corridor, and the only space in the underground part of the museum that receives some daily light, leads visitors to various sections of the main exhibit. The broad overview of the exhibition is chronological (the prologue, the main part, and the epilogue), but within those parts it is organized topically, each representing a different aspect of the war. The exhibition presents the First World War as its prologue, while the epilogue spans the period of Europe's division up until 1989. The museum narrates a story, perhaps a drama, in three acts: the prologue, epicenter, and the afterword that brings a redemptive hope for the future. The presentation is not exhaustive but connects various aspects and theaters of the

war into a whole where certain features of the story stem from preceding sections. The similarities between the murderous ambitions of both Germany and the Soviet Union bring to focus the urgency of the war machine and an internal logic of violence. The exhibition's comparative approach highlights aspects of the war that were familiar in Eastern Europe but were largely neglected in the West, such as the fate of the "Bloodlands" (as termed by Timothy Snyder) between the Soviet Union and the German Reich.

After the prologue to the war, a visitor enters the main sections: the epicenter that begins with a discussion of the birth and expansion of totalitarian regimes in Germany, the Soviet Union, Italy, and Japan. The local history of the Free City of Gdańsk is embedded in the main exhibition in separate subsections. The core of the exhibition starts with German and Soviet aggression on Poland in September 1939. Here the visitor may begin to grasp why the museum describes war as merciless. Apart from some references to military warfare—to a war machine that mobilized millions of people for the war effort—various subsections show the new character of war: occupation, collaboration, and state terror. Additionally, while the Nazis and Soviets remain the main (evil) actors, nobody's crimes are forgotten; for example, Americans, the victorious heroes, even if late coming, were also guilty of creating suffering by bombing Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

The entrance to the heart of the museum is marked with huge letters: TERROR. Visitors pass these letters as if going through a gate. It is in this section where German and Soviet terror against civilians, German and Soviet deportations, and finally the Nazi genocide of Jews, Sinti, and Roma are shown. Although for most, train wagons are associated with the Holocaust, a train wagon on display here exposes the power of a more comparative setting: it connects deportations and experiences of forced labor and camps with the extermination.

After the section on terror, one arrives in an area devoted to resistance and the path that eventually led to the end of the war. Yet the exhibition does not end here. It leads the visitor to the postwar period, when the Iron Curtain divided the world. The exhibition ends with a section on the long shadow of war—a period neither peace nor war—which reflects the most recent historiography that questions traditional chronologies and the claim that 1945 marked a definitive end to the Second World War. The long and painful process of coming out of war in many respects and in many places resembled a different phase of the war, rather than peace.

Conceptually, the exhibition balances the totality of the event—the overwhelming monumentality of historical facts, numbers, and even elements of master narratives—with the emotional impact of a detailed or individual story. Perhaps one of the most powerful artifacts at the museum is a note that Bolesław (Bolek) Wnuk, a member of the Polish Parliament who in 1939 became a Nazi prisoner, left for his family on a handkerchief smuggled out of the prison where he was confined. The note says: "My beloved Wife, Niuniusia, Lalunia, Grześ, Mother, sister, mother-in-law, cousins, friends, I will be executed by the German authorities



This image is from the section devoted to the Holocaust. (Photo by Andrzej Hoja)

today. I am dying for country with a smile on my face, but I am dying innocently. Let God pay for my blood with eternal damnation for the foul villains. Love, Bolek.” The particularly painful twist to the story is that while Bolek Wnuk died at the hands of the Nazis, his brother died at the hands of the Soviets in the Katyń massacre. The handkerchief and its story speak to major meta-themes in Polish history: the sense of being an innocent victim, overpowered by an aggressor; willingness and even happiness to die for one’s country; and the presence of God as the eternal judge of history. And yet the intimacy of its message, the drama of the family hopelessly stuck between two oppressors, gives this very Polish story a powerful universal meaning.

Many of the artifacts in the exhibition function in a similar way; they speak for themselves only through individual story and historical context. And in the majority of the sections, the museum manages to balance its voice between contextualized details and larger themes of the war. An additional layer of scenographic (or *mis-en-scene*) theatricalization aims at visual mimicry of the past to



This image depicts the section devoted to military warfare, which includes a copy of a Junker airplane. (Photo by Andrzej Hoja)

create a perception that visitors are immersed in war is present only at the beginning and the end of the exhibit: the visitors enter and leave through a prewar and postwar street. In the remaining sections, the scenography is not overwhelming; rather, it supplements the message. It plays the role of background, but does not imitate wartime. Empathy is more likely to be built through an understanding of context than through an overtly emotional staging of the past.

Museum as a Space for Dialogue

“Curating” means “caring for,” write academics Erica Lehrer and Cynthia E. Milton. In this understanding, museums are like sites of practice that are “social, embodied, and generative.”⁴ They encourage dialogue, working through difficult pasts, coming

⁴ Erica Lehrer and Cynthia E. Milton, introduction to *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places*, ed. Erica Lehrer, Cynthia E. Milton, and Monica Eileen Patterson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3.



A Soviet tank on a reconstructed postwar street. (Photo by Andrzej Hoja)

to terms with the knowledge that emerges from historical sources—all with the hope of overcoming individual or societal trauma. The museum invites visitors to view and ponder various moments and aspects of war; its intent is not to commemorate the death of the innocent and heroic but to understand the scope and consequences of rabid nationalism, racism, and intolerance. The goal should be to settle or challenge established meanings through dialogue at the intersections of many other discussions: about human nature, national histories, and mechanisms of violence and exclusion.

A consistent effort at the museum is to complicate the ideas of war heroism and daily militarism. The museum shows that war is an existential catastrophe for all: for the defenders and aggressors, for soldiers and civilians. There are no social groups, ethnicities, or genders immune to experiencing or causing violence. War and violence are catastrophic disruptions, destabilizers, and sources of displacement and trauma that take decades to heal. The dialogic relationship between the sections on forced labor, eugenics, concentration camps, ethnic cleansing, and finally the annihilation of the Jews shows with dramatic clarity how hatred and suspicion built out of racism or nationalism affect social practices of whole societies. The comparative setting helps to illustrate the consequences of some of the Nazi decisions. For example, the museum is one of the first reminders of the almost forgotten fate of the Soviet prisoners of war, whom Germans starved to death.

War does not create black-and-white scenarios. The complexities of individual choices as well as the moral ambiguities of many of these choices constantly accompany museum visitors. For example, the section on forced labor looks at the idea of segregation of these laborers from German society. Former workers'

badges, clippings from newspapers, individual testimonies and letters, and photographs show the scope of stigmatization and exclusion. At the end, an amateur movie from 1941 depicts the cruel and racist consensus in war-deprived German society—in Silesia, in this particular case. The camera follows a German boy and a Polish girl who was a forced laborer in the boy's neighborhood. Entangled in a relationship, they are punished by a small community of people who were most likely neighbors. Both are led on a sandy main road with pieces of paper attached to them that inform the passersby and audience of their actions, condemned as racial defilement. In the middle of a yelling crowd, their hair is shaved and they are humiliated by profanities. The locals in the village voluntarily take on the role of the protectors of race purity through acts of public shaming. They become an extension of the cruel laws. They burn the hair of the boy and girl in a ritual reminiscent of witch hunts, during which one's hair was burned as an extension of the body that needs to be deprived of any power.

This "invitation" to visitors into this incident between locals allows them to experience the atmosphere of a world in which people are stigmatized, excluded, and humiliated. How violence can emerge even if there is familiarity and even intimacy is perhaps most striking in the section devoted to the Holocaust, and especially the part on pogroms, which speaks through comparative context, including Jedwabne in Poland, Iași in Romania, and Lviv' and Kaunas in Ukraine and Lithuania. One of the most powerful artifacts in this section is a destroyed corpus of a Lenin statue found in the mass grave of Jews killed by Poles in Jedwabne, which is displayed along with photos that show the prevalence of a ritual that associates Jews with Communists in other parts of the country. This setting also shows how victims of the occupation can quickly turn into collaborators and how fluid the relationships between perpetrators, victims, collaborators, and helpers can be. As in the case of the amateur film, this exhibit illustrates the implication of a local population in the circle of murder and hate.

A few meters away from the destroyed Lenin statue, there are examples of different responses to the situation of Jews under German occupation. A silver plate that a Polish family received from Jews in a ghetto in exchange for food indicates how deeply the Poles were intertwined in everyday life. Next to the plate is a shabby bowl left by Jews as a gesture of thanks to their Polish rescuers. Discussion of what constitutes good, indifferent, or bad behavior in war is one of the goals of the museum; showing complexity of human behavior is key to the museum's mission. The comparative settings help to illustrate that moral ambiguities and blurred lines between the good, bad, and indifferent are universal. It perhaps urges visitors to reflect on their own national histories and their claims to innocence.

In the specific Polish context, the museum invites visitors to reflect on both the uniqueness and commonness of Polish history. Possibly the first time in the public sphere on this scale, wartime history is presented not as a history of "Polish us" (as victims, combatants, or ancestors of imagined "Polishness") but as a history of "us"



Main axis of the museum; visible is the entrance to the section on German and Soviet terror. (Photo by Andrzej Hoja)

(Polish, Jewish, etc.). While enlarging the panorama and showing many possible shades of human behavior, Polish history does not lose its uniqueness, but rather gains many new dimensions. In this respect the museum in Gdańsk seems to represent an evolution from centralized guardhouse mentality that some of the Warsaw museums represent to a confirmation of an inverse relationship between memorization of the past and reflection on this past.

Epilogue

On April 6, 2017, the minister of culture and national heritage fired the management of the museum who was responsible for the successful completion of the building as well as creation of the main exhibit. Inadvertently, this decision confirms the historical and political importance of the museum and made it an international news story. The termination was the result of a conflict that began almost as soon as the idea of the museum was born, when the museum came under criticism from right-wing conservative politicians, historians, and journalists.

Although the museum remains open, new leadership has promised to make changes to the institution. The nomination of Karol Nawrocki as director unfortunately shows the direction the museum (and Polish politics of culture) is heading. His work is focused on the local history of Solidarity; he never belonged to the museum's team or studied the war, is internationally unknown, and is an inexperienced historian from the department of the Institute of National Remembrance in Gdańsk. Instead of being part of an equal dialogue on history, the government

prefers to stay isolated, resigning from a significant opportunity to be heard in an international setting.

.

Anna Muller is assistant professor of history at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. From 2010 to 2013, she worked a curator at the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, Poland. Her book on the life of women in prison cells in postwar Poland, titled *If the Walls Could Speak*, will appear in October 2017 with Oxford University Press.

Daniel Logemann studied East European history, Polish literature, and southeast Europe studies in Jena, Lublin, and Cracow from 2000 to 2007. For his dissertation on day-to-day contacts between Germans and Poles in Leipzig between 1972 and 1989 he received the 2010 Academic Promotional Prize of the Embassy of the Republic of Poland. From 2010 to 2015 he worked as a research assistant and curator at the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk, Poland. Since February 2015 he has been managing director at the Europäisches Kolleg Jena, Germany.