

Introduction: Exhibiting Violence

The centennial of the outbreak of the First World War has given rise to a number of prominent exhibitions. As Europe increasingly conceives of itself as a peaceful continent, the commemoration of war, atrocities and mass violence is gaining ground in museums — not as the celebration of victory, but as a means of evoking the horrors of a violent past that has been happily left behind and to pay respect to the victims. The traditional military museum, which glorifies the heroic traditions of a nation in arms and waging just wars, seems increasingly out of date. As Jay Winter has recently argued, war museums face the pitfall of pseudo-realism, even if they avoid fetishizing the weapons on display. The more they attempt to pull the visitor into the experience of battle — as can be seen in the permanent exhibition of the Imperial War Museum in London — the more obvious it becomes that re-living the existential threats and horrors of combat in the protected space of a museum is simply not possible. Therefore, according to Winter, war museums should be sites of contestation, inviting reflections on the extent to which violence, fear, suffering and death can actually be exhibited.¹

These questions pertain to an ethical dimension that war museums easily overlook. Ethnographic museums, on the contrary, have long discussed the ethical limits of exhibiting objects that originate in one way or the other in violent contexts, especially in colonial settings.² Sensitive museologists have developed standards to safeguard respect and reverence for human remains and sacred objects that have been appropriated by force.³ Wiebke Ahrndt, the director of the Übersee-Museum (Overseas Museum) in Bremen, emphasizes this issue in her discussion of

¹ J. Winter, *Museums and the Representation of War*, [in:] *Does War Belong in Museums? The Representation of Violence in Exhibitions*, ed. by W. Muchitsch, Bielefeld 2014, pp. 21–37.

² *Quo vadis, Völkerkundemuseum? Aktuelle Debatten zu ethnologischen Sammlungen in Museen und Universitäten*, ed. by M. Kraus, K. Noack, Bielefeld 2015.

³ International Council of Museums, *ICOM-Code of Ethics for Museums*, 2013. The ICOM Code of *Professional Ethics* was adopted unanimously by the General Assembly of ICOM in Buenos Aires on 4 November 1986. It was amended by the 20th General Assembly in Barcelona on 6 July 2001, retitled *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, and revised by the 21st General Assembly in Seoul on 8 October 2004.

the history and debates surrounding the Recommendations for the Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections, which the 'Human Remains' Working Group of the German Museums Association issued in 2013. Such standards are equally applicable for concentration camp memorial sites. Developed with regard to contested and sensitive exhibits, they tend to be too easily discarded when shocking photographs and other representations of violence are used to support narratives of cruelty and victimhood, as often happens in war museums or museums of national history. Krzysztof Banach pursues this issue further in "Exhibiting Violence or Teaching Values? Historical Exhibitions at a Modern Museum of Martyrdom", where he looks at the example of the former concentration camp Majdanek.

The papers presented in this thematic volume address the limits of exhibiting violence from different angles. Most of them originate from the workshop "Exhibiting Violence" that was organised by the Imre Kertész Kolleg Jena in late February 2014 and generously hosted by the Goethe Institute in Lille and the Historial de la Grande Guerre in Péronne, France.⁴ Bearing in mind that the First World War marked the beginning of a new form of exhibiting war and violence in museums and sparked broader discussions as to how to include and exhibit civilian suffering, the experience of total destruction and widespread death, the central aim of this workshop was to discuss the origins of presenting violence and war in museums both in Western and East Central Europe during and directly after the First World War.⁵

A general view of theoretical discourses on war and violence is provided by Wolfgang Knöbl in his article on the history of sociological thought on violence. He suggests that in theorizing violence today, we must re-engage macro questions and re-contextualize particular instances of violence in terms of broader political, economic and social circumstances. Thomas Thiemeyer's contribution surveys the various forms and paradigm shifts in addressing war experience and displaying the atrocities of war in museums and exhibitions of the First, but also of the Second World War.

Popular images from the years 1914–1918 often presented war as an adventure story, showcasing ideals based on the boldness and bravery of soldiers in combat. This is discussed by Christine Brocks, who argues that these first war photos were in most cases reconstructions. However, as propaganda was for a long time primarily textual, visual representations were not censored consistently. Therefore, these images cannot only be seen under the perspective of propaganda, but are equally important as historical records.

⁴ For information on the workshop and the activities of the Imre Kertész Kolleg in this field see <<http://www.imre-kertesz-kolleg.uni-jena.de/index.php?id=711>> and <<http://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/home/>>.

⁵ C. Beil, *Der ausgestellte Krieg: Präsentationen des Ersten Weltkriegs, 1914–1939*, Tübingen 2004.

Issues central to a new ethics of presenting objects of war and violence were discussed in the workshop, as was the impact of these debates on historical museums and exhibitions. Petra Bopp's paper, "A New Sensitivity? Photographs of Violence of Wehrmacht soldiers in World War II", examines the use of war photos in two controversial exhibitions held in Germany in the 1990s: "War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944" and "Crimes of the German Wehrmacht: Dimensions of a War of Annihilation, 1941–1944". Both were instructive as to the ways exhibitions can use photographs to create a historical argument, and they initiated important debates on photography as a historical source as well as on its ethical dimension. Felicitas Heimann–Jelinek reflects on the exhibition "Masks: An attempt to define the Shoah", which she curated together with others in Vienna in 1997 and which explored visitors' reactions to being confronted with the actual death masks of Nazi victims. As to the presentation of sensitive objects, Richard Benjamin argues in his paper on the core exhibition of the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool that museums ought to actively engage visitors with relevant displays. In his view, a museum gives a broader outlook than a book and may encourage its visitors to engage with issues they have learned about and to do something. Pawel Machcewicz, on the other hand, discusses the role of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk primarily in terms of its capacity to explain the past rather than to affect the present or future. A similar approach guides the paper by Barbara Kirshenblatt–Gimblett on the role of violence in the narration on Jewish historical experience and Polish–Jewish relations in the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. She discusses how anti–Semitic violence is being given the appropriate weight without falling into the trap of telling a teleological story that lead inevitably to genocide.

Pictures of violence are not much help to make us understand. They haunt us, as Susan Sontag has pointed out. They satisfy our voyeuristic instincts, challenge our moral impulse and undermine our capacity of thinking politically.⁶ Violent histories and how they are represented in museums in many ways affect our memory of the past as well as the ways we tell history. Thus the role of museums and their potential as institutions of education, but also of propaganda, require careful discussion.

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⁶ S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London 2004, p. 80 and pp. 105–106.