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Museum of the Second World War
Gdańsk

Representing violence and death in the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk

The Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk is an attempt to create a comprehensive narrative about the most devastating conflict of modern times, including its political and military dimensions. However, contrary to what one might think — and judging by its name — it will not be a military museum, but an institution that focusses predominantly on the fate of civilian populations.¹ Special emphasis will be placed on the experience of Eastern–Central Europe, those ‘Bloodlands’, to use the title of Timothy Snyder’s book and also his concept that this part of Europe was an epicentre of political repression, mass violence and genocide in the twentieth century.² The Museum will be opened in 2016, but the project of its permanent exhibition (with a total surface of approximately 6,800 square metres) has already been completed and will be discussed here in detail.

Given the subject of the museum, it is evident that representations of violence and death will be its central themes. I will present here some characteristic features of the museum curators’ approach in creating the exhibition and in dealing with photographs and objects related to violence and death. I will focus mainly on the representation of the most direct, physical violence, especially those acts which were directed against civilians: imprisonment, forced labour, deportations, executions, torture. This kind of violence is generally seen as the most drastic kind: as being closer to ‘pure’ essence than the ‘standard’ violence inherent in warfare, as understood in military terms (soldier against soldier). I will also include in my analysis other important historical phenomena represented in

¹ Regarding the concept of the Museum of the Second World War see: P. Machcewicz, ‘Museum statt Stacheldrahtverhaue’: *Das Museum des Zweiten Weltkriegs in Danzig — Konzeption und Kontroversen*, [in:] *Europa und sein Osten: Geschichtskulturelle Herausforderungen*, ed. by W. Borodziej, J. von Puttkamer, Munich 2012, pp. 81–103; idem, *Das Museum des Zweiten Weltkrieges in Polen*, [in:] *Erinnern an den Zweiten Weltkrieg: Mahnmale und Museen in Mittel- und Osteuropa*, ed. by S. Troebst, J. Wolf, Leipzig 2011, pp. 161–172.

² T. Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, New York 2010.

the permanent exhibition that could be interpreted as pertaining to the realm of violence in a broader sense: occupation and annexation of conquered territories, and discrimination of subjugated nations or social groups. Those policies might be defined as political or symbolical violence, but were also often implemented and sanctioned by means of physical violence, or at least its pending possibility. This symbolical kind of violence can be exemplified in the removal of historical monuments from Polish streets and squares by the German occupation authorities, or by the system of racial segregation that they created (e.g. different food rations for Germans, Poles and Jews, or separating various national groups in the public sphere: in public transportation, ghettos for Jews, special districts for Germans). All of these dimensions of the repressive and discriminatory practice of war and occupation, in an everyday experience, overlapped and created one manifold universe in which most people in occupied countries lived. They are also treated in a holistic way in the exhibition of the Museum of the Second World War, which presents a broad scope of occupation policies by the Germans, the Soviets and the Japanese in the Far East. However, as it was already mentioned, for the sake of clarity, physical violence will be the central focus, although in historical reality it was usually mixed with other forms of repression and discrimination.

ABUNDANCE OF VIOLENCE

The content of the permanent exhibition of the Second World War is inevitably overloaded with images and objects that represent death and violence. It results, unequivocally, from the main narrative threads about the war, terror, the Holocaust and other atrocities. Having this in mind, the curators did not want to use photographs and objects deliberately for the purpose of shocking visitors. Their approach has been more intuitive and common-sense, rather than one adhering to any defined set of concrete rules, and it can be most clearly explained by referring to some examples of adopted visual policies. If there was a choice between many photographs documenting a single event or historical phenomenon (e.g. an execution, medical experiments or the fate of Soviet prisoners of war), those selected for the exhibition usually have not been the most drastic ones (for instance, as a rule, mutilated bodies are not shown in detail). Photographs of corpses have not been enlarged and are not treated as central points of the exhibition. The Museum of the Second World War does not employ tactics like those implemented by the US Holocaust Museum in Washington, where the permanent exhibition is opened by a large-scale photograph, the first image seen by visitor, showing a pile of corpses discovered by US soldiers in a German concentration camp that they liberated in April 1945. Presumably the intention is to grab the visitor emotionally the very moment they enter the exhibition. The purpose is also to build an understanding and identification between contemporary Americans and their

forebears who had fought against Nazi Germany and unveiled the horrors of the Holocaust. Interestingly enough, the photographs of the liberation of concentration camps that the Holocaust Museum staff chose, which visitors regard as the most shocking, are less drastic and less visually explicit than those initially considered — those that were eventually rejected out of concern that they could be too strong for the very beginning of the exhibit.³ This situation might provide a good example of how relative and subjective the boundaries of horror in representing historical events can be.

For curators of the Museum of the Second World War, one of the crucial assumptions while creating the exhibition was that a visitor (and generally an average human being) has limited psychological capabilities. That is to say, if a visual message about violence and death tends to touch or exceed their emotional frontiers, they become less involved in the exhibition; drastic images may become repetitive, boring or even emotionally neutral. There could then be a risk of getting adverse results instead of those intended. Instead of evoking empathy in the visitor for the victims, an abundance of images of violence and death might lead to a ‘compassion fatigue’, to use a notion introduced by Paul Williams.⁴ Contemporary museum visitors might feel even more emotionally distant and ‘withdrawn’ after absorbing so many brutal and overwhelming images. As a result, these emotions can overshadow all other important messages intended by curators (e.g. about the roots of prejudice and violence and the different strategies for coping with them).

Another rule adopted by the Museum of the Second World War is to avoid ‘theatrical’ design in representing scenes of violence. Relying on ‘rich’ design (e.g. a combination of objects, sounds and visual effects) in order to reconstruct real places, like torture and interrogation rooms, prison cells or execution sites, or even to stage a sort of ‘drama of re-enactment’ is commonplace in many contemporary historical museums. Experts in museology have developed a special notion for this type of exhibition, the ‘performing museum’, as an alternative and, perhaps, successor to the ‘interpretative museum’, which focusses on explaining and commenting on historical events, but not re-enacting them. Those who are less favourable towards theatrical design in historical exhibitions warn that this trend could lead to a ‘Disneyfication’ of museums (including historical and memorial museums), which often aim to be as attractive to the average visitor as modern entertainment centres.⁵ One of the most recent examples of the re-enactment technique in a historical museum can be seen in the Pomorska Street Museum

³ E.T. Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum*, New York 2001, pp. 193–194.

⁴ P. Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, Oxford–New York 2007, pp. 151–152.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 96–101.

in Cracow, situated in a former Gestapo prison, where an interrogation cell was re-created as part of the exhibition design (in its vicinity one hears the voice of a German police officer). Visitors to this museum also encounter sounds representing the execution of Poles. Less striking examples of the theatrical approach include the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising, which features the reconstruction of a sewer as used by Home Army soldiers and civilians for communication and evacuation in 1944; and the Imperial War Museum, which re-enacts the attack of a London street under air-strike during the 1940 'Blitz'.

Paradoxically enough, these re-enactment techniques, which nowadays are often regarded as the essence of a new and modern design approach, in a way repeat trends that in the immediate post-war years predominated in presentations of Nazi atrocities to a larger audience. In an exhibition arranged as early as 1945 in the former Dachau concentration camp, 'life-size mannequins in SS and prisoners' uniforms were set up to demonstrate the use of the 'whipping block' and the practice of 'pole hanging': suspending prisoners from a tall pole by their hands bound behind their backs'.⁶ In France, a mobile exhibition visited many towns. It consisted of a reconstructed tower from the Buchenwald concentration camp with mannequins in both SS and prisoners' uniforms, recreating various scenes, including 'the hanging of a prisoner [...] with stuffed dummies in original uniforms'.⁷

Similar explicit design techniques, with mannequins re-enacting camp atrocities, were implemented in the first exhibition in Poland, which was opened in the former concentration camp at Majdanek in September 1945. Interestingly enough, it evoked some criticism in the Polish press, which compared the exhibit to a 'chamber of horror' where visitors paid to see scenes of medieval tortures and executions.⁸

There will be many objects in the permanent exhibition of the Museum of the Second World War that represent repression, torture and execution: whips, truncheons, the handcuffs of German policemen, objects and uniforms from concentration camps, or cartridges from sites of mass executions. In any case, such artefacts have not been used for re-enactment purposes, for the same reason that the most drastic photographs have not been enlarged or highlighted. This attitude is related to a concern that the curators have about the overabundance of images of horror: on the one hand, they might bring about a superficial, 'voyeuristic' interest

⁶ H. Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau: The Uses and Abuses of a Concentration Camp, 1933–2001*, New York 2001, p. 170.

⁷ P. Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945–1965*, New York 2000, pp. 216–217.

⁸ Z. Wóycicka, *Przerwana żaloba: Polskie spory wokół pamięci nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych i zagłady 1944–1950*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 280–281 (This book is available in English as *Arrested Mourning: Memory of the Nazi Camps in Poland, 1944–1950*, trans. by J. Tilbury, Frankfurt 2014.)

in violence; on the other hand, they might produce a lack of real interest in the fate of the victims or in the historical context that would explain who they were, why they were persecuted and from which political, ideological or racial motives. Although every typology is certainly reductive of the variety of real cases, most of which are likely situated somewhere in a grey zone, if we refer back to the two models of a historical museum mentioned earlier — the performing museum and the interpretative museum — we can see that the Museum of the Second World War is much closer to the latter. The Museum's curators have been careful to frame images of violence and death within a broader context: explaining their causes, the ideologies behind them, the perpetrators' motivations and the victims' individual stories and testimonies.

PERSONALISATION OF VIOLENCE

In the permanent exhibition of the Museum of the Second World War, the images of dead people or people awaiting execution were carefully chosen by the curators: they chose the photographs for which they could identify the victims (i.e. their names and some facts of their life). For instance, there is a photograph of a young Polish girl who was shot by a German pilot in Warsaw in September 1939; it was taken by an American war correspondent named Julien Bryan. The photo is accompanied by the story of her sister, Kazimiera Mika, who in the photograph is kneeling over her sister's dead body. Bryan talked to Mika in September 1939 and met her again many years after the war when he revisited Warsaw. Another photograph shows Bryan embracing Mika, a very human gesture of compassion, over the corpse of her sister.

Out of several images from the massacre of Jews in Liepaja, Latvia in 1941, curators chose to present a photograph of one family awaiting execution because it was possible to identify all the family members and to provide some biographical information about them.

One of the underlying aims in structuring the narrative of the exhibition was to distinguish the different perspectives of victims, perpetrators and bystanders or witnesses (to use the typology proposed by Raul Hilberg).⁹ The Museum of the Second World War will present a famous photograph, of a German policeman shooting at a Ukrainian woman holding an infant in her arms, that is also shown at the Holocaust Museum in Washington. In it, we clearly see the victims and the perpetrator. We are also to some extent able to reconstruct the emotional attitude of the perpetrator: he sent this photograph to his family in Germany with a neutral, or perhaps even self-flattering, explanation: 'Ukraine 1942, Jewish operation,

⁹ R. Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933–1945*, New York 1992.



1. Photograph of Kazimiera Mika, by Julien Bryan.
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington

Ivangorod'. The bystander's perspective is also indicated: the photograph was intercepted by a clandestine unit of the Polish Home Army at the post office in Warsaw; in this way a bystander became a witness to a horrible crime. With this context and additional information, the photograph tells us much more — about the mechanisms of the Holocaust and human attitudes. Needless to say, Hilberg's typology is not all-encompassing and evident in all instances, which is something

that the curators have been well aware of. In many cases, particular stories presented in the exhibition illustrate the blurring of boundaries in social roles facing the extermination of Jews and other crimes committed during the war.

The exhibition contains many objects which had belonged to victims and were excavated, in many cases, during exhumations. Curators attempted to connect them with real people and to show their faces while they were still alive. Objects that belonged to the Jewish victims killed in the Kulmhof (Chełmno nad Nerem) death camp have been placed alongside photographs of Jews from the Litzmanstadt (Łódź) ghetto awaiting deportation to Kulmhof. A farewell letter by one of them is quoted, written probably just before he was taken to the railway carriage. The exhibition also includes objects found during the exhumation of the Jews killed in Jedwabne in July 1941, most of whom were burnt alive in a barn. Out of those numerous objects (e.g. shoes, parts of clothes, belts, coins) that the Museum has in its possession, curators chose to present the keys that victims had with them when they were murdered. Thus, they are presented as human beings with emotions and the expectation that they will survive and return to their homes. Part of this section will also include pre-war photographs of the Jewish inhabitants of Jedwabne so that we can think about them not only as dead people whose belongings we can see, but as human beings who had lives.

This approach has been conceived deliberately in order to avoid a danger inherent in exhibiting objects left behind by murdered people. As James E. Young rightly put it: 'Armless sleeves, eyeless lenses, headless caps, footless shoes: victims are known only by their absence, by the moment of their destruction. In great loose piles, these remnants remind us not of the lives that once animated them, so much as the brokenness of their lives. For when the memory of a people and its past are reduced to the bits and rags of their belongings, memory of life is lost'.¹⁰

While this approach to remembering individual victims attempts to show their faces and biographies and allow visitors to hear their voices (e.g. audio testimonies of former prisoners or camp mates and other groups of persecuted people), it does not necessarily enable the visitor to identify with the victims outright. The Museum of the Second World War has not adopted, for instance, the practices of the US Holocaust Museum where each visitor, upon arrival, is issued an identity card in the name of an actual Jewish victim. Nor have we adopted the practices of the Johannesburg Apartheid Museum, where visitors choose identity cards according to their race (whites and blacks), and then follow (for the first part of the exhibition)

¹⁰ J.E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, New Haven–London, 1993, p. 132; Concerning exhibiting objects related to violence and death, see also: A. Ziębińska–Witek, *Estetyki reprezentacji śmierci w ekspozycjach historycznych*, [in:] *Obóz–Muzeum: Trauma we współczesnym muzealnictwie*, ed. by M. Fabisiak, M. Owsinski, Kraków 2013, pp. 31–48.



2. Keys which belonged to the Jews murdered in Jedwabne. Photograph by Dominik Jagodziński

corresponding routes that are supposed to give them a real taste of the Apartheid system.¹¹

Instead, the curators of the exhibition in Gdańsk opted to avoid direct suggestion or ‘pressure’ upon the visitor to identify with the victims, reasoning that their fate was so much different from that of a contemporary person (often a tourist) on a brief visit to a historical museum, that such an identification strategy might turn out to be superficial, too easy and perhaps too much like a game. Another reason is that the historical experience presented and interpreted in the Museum of the Second World War is much broader and complex than it is in an institution focusing on a single theme, even one of such magnitude as the Holocaust. Consequently, a parallel strategy in the Gdańsk museum would have to comprise of a broad variety of characters with whom a visitor might identify — not only multiple categories of victims, but also, for example, resistance fighters. These remarks are not intended as a polemic with the exhibiting strategies of other museums, many of which are highly acclaimed institutions setting trends in the realm of modern historical or memorial museums, but rather aim simply to explain the different approach adopted by the Museum of the Second World War. Its main goal is to enable visitors to **understand** the roots of violence, the motives of the perpetrators and the fate of the victims, but not necessarily to **identify** with the victims themselves.

¹¹ P. Williams, *Memorial Museums*, p. 148.

CONTEXTUALIZING VIOLENCE

The exhibition also presents several large-scale objects related to violence and death. One of these objects is a railway carriage, which acts as a focal point in the section exploring various forms of Nazi terror and genocide. Similar railway carriages are presented in Yad Vashem, the US Holocaust Museum, the Auschwitz–Birkenau Museum and the Majdanek Museum. In all of these museums, they are treated as objects related exclusively to the Holocaust, which is obvious given the scope of those institutions. They are material symbols of the fate of the victims. In Washington, every visitor steps inside a railway carriage (it is a part of the main path through the exhibition) and in this way may perhaps feel closer to the victims. This could be understood as a reconstruction, or perhaps even a re-enactment, of an extreme situation experienced by the victims.

The Museum of the Second World War will also present a railway carriage, but in a different way than the aforementioned institutions. An important part of the message will be to present the complicated story of this particular object: it was originally produced in Germany before the First World War and was used by the railway system; after the Polish state was recreated in 1918, the Polish railway took possession of the carriage; in 1939, it was taken over by the Soviets who invaded Poland and might have used it to deport Poles to Siberia and Kazakhstan in 1940–1941; after June 1941, it was recaptured by the Germans and used again in their railway system. In such carriages, Jews were brought to death camps, prisoners were taken to concentration camps, and deportees and slave labourers were transported.

With this carriage, curators not only attempt to testify to the fate of the victims (as in many other museums), but also to tell a story of twentieth-century Europe: about various forms of repression and enslavement, as well as its changing borders, the disappearance of states and the rise of new regimes. The railway carriage then becomes a microcosm of the twentieth century's history of war, terror, genocide and the Holocaust. It illustrates one of the most difficult challenges to the exhibition of the Museum of the Second World War: how to integrate into a single narrative the many diverse phenomena that nevertheless had some common denominators — hatred, violence, and attempts to subjugate or eliminate large groups of people or even whole nations.

Another example of this interpretative approach, which integrates objects of repression and violence into the exhibition, is the door of a prison cell in Gdańsk. The prison was used by the Gestapo from 1939 to 1945. In 1945, it was used briefly by the Soviet NKVD (secret police), then afterwards by the Polish communist security service, the *Urząd Bezpieczeństwa*. It has been placed in the section of the exhibition that deals with the end of the war and its aftermath, which in Poland and other Eastern European countries (by contrast with Western Europe), did not

involve political freedom and democratic regimes, but rather the continuation of oppression.

To conclude, it should be stressed that in representing historical violence, the Museum of the Second World War does not emphasize the importance of any specific category of victims that might be defined according to political, national or racial criteria. In this respect, it is different from the US Holocaust Museum or the Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem, which commemorate the Jewish tragedy; it is different from the Terror Haza in Budapest, which presents Hungarians as the victims of both Nazism and communism (with an explicit intention to equate both ideologies and regimes); and it is different from the historical museums in Vilnius (the Museum of Genocide Victims), Riga (the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia) and Tallinn (the Museum of Occupations), which tell the stories of the suffering of Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians, as inflicted on them by the Soviet invaders.¹² Nor does the narrative of the museum in Gdańsk present the suffering of a particular group of victims for the purposes of subsequently achieving a foundational national or political goal — such as the founding of the Israeli State in 1948 or the resurrection of the independent Baltic States in the 1990s. The Museum of the Second World War obviously devotes a fair amount of attention and exhibition space to the fate of the Poles persecuted by the Nazis and the Soviets, but it also includes other categories of victims as a central part of its message: Jews, the mentally and physically handicapped who were killed in the Nazi ‘euthanasia’ programme, Soviet prisoners of war and all other categories of prisoners in Nazi camps and civilians persecuted for various reasons throughout occupied Europe and Asia. Violence has been treated as part of a very complex story about occupation, the war and its consequences.

¹² For an analysis of the museums in Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn, see R. W n u k, *Sześć wersji historii II wojny światowej: Wojenne i okupacyjne muzea w państwach powstałych po rozpadzie ZSRR*, [in:] *Wiek nienawiści: studia*, ed. by E. D m i t r ó w et al., Warszawa 2014, pp. 351–380.