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Constructs of “Nation” in First World War Exhibitions

An Analysis of the Musée de l’Armée, Paris,
and the Museum der Bundeswehr, Dresden

In the context of the whole of human history, the concept of “nations” is still a relatively young phenomenon: it was developed in the eighteenth century. Some scientists may argue that national identity has lost its importance these days. Nevertheless, it still seems to be a very powerful concept even today. My understanding of “nation” adheres to the concept introduced by Benedict Anderson,¹ who claims that nations are inventions, so-called “imagined communities”. It is not self-evident that people identify themselves as, for example, German or French. Instead, this process is a historical, political and cultural development. Museums contribute to the formation of “national identity” by demonstrating a “common past” and suggesting unity. By determining what to include and exclude in these concepts, they influence the construction of “national identity”.² The construct of nation is so powerful that people are willing even to murder and to die for it. Not many imaginary concepts can release this kind of power and emotion.³ There is a multifarious connection between museum, nation and war.

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- 1 Anderson, B. (2005) *Die Erfindung der Nation. Zur Karriere eines folgenreichen Konzepts*. Frankfurt/Main: Campus-Verl.
 - 2 See Macdonald, S.J. (2000) Nationale, Postnationale, Transkulturelle Identitäten und das Museum. In: Beier-de Haan, R. ed. *Geschichtskultur in der Zweiten Moderne*. Frankfurt/Main: Campus-Verl., pp. 123–148.
 - 3 See Echternkamp, J. and Müller, O. eds. (2009) *Die Politik der Nation. Deutscher Nationalismus in Krieg und Krisen 1760 bis 1960*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.

The First World War is now considered historicized. However, it does not get a lot of attention in Germany. It seems that the remembrances of the Second World War and the Holocaust are considered more relevant. The French, on the other hand, seem to be more interested in *la Grande Guerre*. It has a greater meaning for its culture and politics. In my master's thesis,⁴ I have explored how the different perspectives on the First World War influence the exhibitions in the national war museums in Paris and Dresden. For around 75 years, most German and French people have considered one another enemies. Now their special bilateral relationship is often emphasized as the motor of the European Union. French president Emmanuel Macron wants to particularly enhance multilateralism. However, both countries currently face populist movements from right-wing parties, who are the biggest critics of the EU and fear the loss of national sovereignty. In this context, I have taken a closer look at the constructs of the “own nation” and the constructs of the neighboring country. For this end, I have chosen a multi-step analyzing procedure, as proposed by Lisa Spanka.⁵ It combines discourse-analytical and semiotic approaches, and takes place on three levels: institution, exhibition and display. In general, my results show that the “nation” is presented in the Musée de l'Armée as something taken for granted. Furthermore, three central strategies for the construction of nation can be identified in this museum:

1. the connection of “nation” and army;
2. the distinction between “own” and “foreign”;
3. the stereotyped representation of masculinity and femininity.

Although war is connoted as destructive and a cause of human suffering, the French soldiers are presented primarily as victims and not as perpetrators. Their deaths serve a higher purpose, that of maintaining the “nation”; thus they are connoted as martyrs. A narrative that separates the nations and clearly defines what is “own” and “foreign” dominates the exhibition. The French white man is in the focus of depictions and narratives, and therefore constitutes the “norm”. French citizens from the colonies are clearly distinguished from the European members of France, so that they appear as a

⁴ Publication expected in 2019.

⁵ See Spanka, L. (2016) Zugänge zur Zeitgeschichte mit dem Museum. Methodologie einer Ausstellungsanalyse. In: Spanka, L. et al. eds. *Zugänge zur Zeitgeschichte: Bild – Raum – Text*. Quellen und Methoden. Marburg: Tectum Wissenschaftsverlag, pp. 183–222.

deviation from this norm. Furthermore, a clear distinction is made between the Alliance and Entente: the latter are repeatedly put in a positive light, whereas the Central Powers are often strongly criticised. Femininity is connoted with weakness and passivity, while masculinity is connoted with power, heroism and patriotism. The representation of the sexes confirms and reproduces conventional gender stereotypes without questioning them.

Although the Museum der Bundeswehr likes to present itself as self-critical, my results suggest that German war crimes are often relativized. In this case, four strategies to construct “nation” could be identified:

1. the relativization of German perpetration during the First World War;
2. the hierarchization of “nations”, whereby the German Reich is predominantly presented as a superior hegemonic power;
3. the soldier as a representative of the “nation” and an opportunity for identification; and
4. the heteronormative and unequal representation of gender.

In most cases, perpetrators are not named or even explicitly criticised. The museum in Dresden also tends to emphasize the dominance of the German Reich in terms of war technology and economic power. The “women’s corner” may lead to an increased visibility for women, but the separating narrative reduces them to their gender attributes and makes the dominance of men appear as a matter of course.

Each generation looks upon historical events in its own specific way. Ever since its inception, the First World War has been on display. During the last one hundred years, exhibitions on the First World War have been installed in various forms with a range of perspectives. In depicting war, museums encounter limits of visualization and appropriateness. In my view, their most important task is to provide information about, and contribute to, the preservation of democratic values. It is therefore of central importance that events such as the First World War and its consequences are presented to the public without the intention of ideological influence. Creative and innovative solutions are required if museums are to meet this challenge. Exhibiting is highly complex, and requires empathy and reflection.

It is very likely that our world will change significantly over the next one hundred years and the First World War will be seen from a completely different perspective. Perhaps other wars will even oust the First World War from public consciousness.